

Students' expertise helps map 11 days, 125 acts of U.S. police violence

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A recent report by Amnesty International tracked, with UC Berkeley students' help, dozens of cases across the country of police violence against protesters, from May 26 — the day after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis while in police custody — to June 5. Credit: Amnesty International

Five hundred videos in 10 days. That's the job 10 students and alumni at

UC Berkeley's Human Rights Investigations Lab and students at Cambridge University recently tackled with researchers from Amnesty International's Citizen Evidence Lab to map police violence across the U.S. in the wake of the May 25 killing of George Floyd in police custody. Together, they searched for, examined and verified digital content shot by citizens and posted on social media.

The result was the publication last week of Amnesty International's shocking online report, "Black Lives Matter Protest: Mapping Police Violence Across the U.S." It provides documentation, including videos, of 125 separate incidents of excessive force committed by state and local police officers and the National Guard against protesters in 40 states and the District of Columbia between May 26, the day after Floyd died in Minneapolis, and June 5.

"(Amnesty's Sam Dubberley) provided us and our partners at Cambridge University with hours of video footage to verify, from New York to California, and to analyze where the violence occurred, who led it, what types of force were used and who was injured," said Diana Chavez-Varela, a December 2019 Berkeley graduate who has continued to work for the lab and the campus's Human Rights Center. Amnesty's experts in weapons, U.S. Constitutional law and international law reviewed all footage before publication.

Among the report's findings were that these violations occurred at demonstrations denouncing such police behavior, that disproportionate and indiscriminate force was used against entire demonstrations if a minority of protesters acted unlawfully, that the problem's scope is national, that riot control agents were misused, causing protesters physical harm, and that First Amendment protections were violated.

The online report allows visitors to the site to launch a map of the 125 incidents, which can be filtered by type of weapon used—including

batons, flash grenades and pepper balls—and by category of law enforcement authority involved, such as county police, state police or National Guard. Corresponding videos then pop up for viewing.

Berkeley students at the Human Rights Investigations Lab typically do online open source research and verification to find evidence of potential war crimes and other human rights abuses happening in other countries. "But this was in our backyard, we were experiencing the protests and violence firsthand," said Chavez-Varela, who is sheltering in place in Los Angeles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The project was an outlet for us to do something to address systemic racism," she added. "With this report, hopefully Amnesty will press for policy changes."

Andrea Lampros, associate director of the Human Rights Center and co-founder of the investigations lab, which opened in 2016, said that, earlier this year, when the pandemic led Berkeley to take its courses online, the more than 75 students in the lab were in the midst of eight different investigations, but "didn't skip a beat" in finishing the projects remotely.

Not only that, but the lab pivoted its focus to projects related to COVID-19, including investigating dangerous misinformation about the pandemic—including about false causes and cures—that was going viral on [social media](#).

"We decided that we needed a summer lab," said Lampros, "and since so many of our students were not able to work this summer in ways they had before—in internships and other jobs—we marshaled their energy to respond to COVID-19 and, with the support of donors, the Student Technology Fund and CITRIS, we got some small stipends for about 40 students—actually, most of them have now graduated and are new Berkeley alums—through the end of July."

The lab contributes verified information found on social media—in photos, video and posts—to more than 25 partners, such as Amnesty International, the Syrian Archive, United Nations fact-finding teams and prominent national and international news outlets. Its students come from more than two dozen majors and minors at Berkeley and collectively speak more than 30 languages.

But the lab needs more funding and staffing to be able to respond to its many incoming requests, said Lampros. "The summer teams have been super busy," she said.

Lampros said students and alumni are helping to investigate how people in Latin America have been treated and detained under quarantine, the targeting of health care facilities and workers viewed as spreading the virus and the rise in sexual violence against indigenous women living near oil pipeline "man camps" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After Floyd's killing, she said, the lab formed a rapid response team—"anybody trained at the lab who could contribute to work related to the protests"—to operate above and beyond the planned projects.

In addition to the recent Amnesty report on [police violence](#), the lab mates also have contributed to a major investigation on the use of tear gas and so-called non-lethal weapons around the world and during Black Lives Matter protests.

"In these intense times—as important challenges to structural racism erupt, and we learn to live in a pandemic—we all miss working in physical proximity to one another," said Lampros, who expects the lab will continue functioning remotely in the fall. "But we'll use the digital tools we've always used to document human rights globally and here at home. Our Berkeley students are on the digital front lines, and their work is needed now more than ever."

More information: Black Lives Matter Protest: Mapping Police Violence Across the USA. [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news ...
vgprlA IQEgOimjmBngs](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/black-lives-matter-protest-mapping-police-violence-across-the-usa/)

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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