

# Black men are the most frequent victims of killings by off-duty officers, finds new research

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Black men are the most common victims of killings committed by off-duty police officers in the U.S., according to a new Yale-led study.

In an analysis of 242 incidences in which people were killed by [police officers](#) when they were off duty between 2013 and 2021, a research team found that nearly 40% of the victims were Black men. White men (25.2%) and Hispanic men (11.2%) were the second- and third-most common victims.

The study, based on information from the Mapping Police Violence database and news reports from Media Cloud, also revealed that the presence of off-duty officers frequently escalated confrontational situations, many incidences occurred while off-duty officers were performing side jobs as security officers, and that these officers often obscured information about their involvement in situations that turned deadly.

The study was published in the journal *Health Services Research*.

The findings suggest the need for more concrete regulations and deeper consideration of off-duty officers' roles, researchers say.

While a growing body of research is evaluating various aspects of policing, the actions of off-duty [police](#) officers remain understudied, said Emmanuella Asabor, lead author of the study and an M.D.-Ph.D. student at Yale School of Medicine and Yale School of Public Health.

"Due to the weapons allowances for off-duty police officers and that off-duty and even veteran police officers are imbued with a great degree of power to intervene, we felt that off-duty policing was worthy of investigation," said Asabor.

According to the analysis, less than half of victims were alleged to be

carrying a weapon at the time of their killings and nearly all were shot.

And while only 6.3% of the U.S. population identified as Black men in 2021, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 39.3% of those killed by off-duty police officers were Black men, the study found.

"Black men were the most frequent victims of off-duty police violence," Asabor said. "And that's consistent with the literature on policing."

The researchers also compared whether information about violence committed by off-duty police officers was consistent with data about on-duty police violence, breaking this information down by the racial and ethnic background of victims.

When they broke down the percentage of individuals killed by off-duty police compared with on-duty officers, they found that a higher percentage of Black women victims (12.8%) died at the hands of off-duty officers (compared with 87.2% killed by on-duty officers) than any other racial or ethnic group. By comparison just 1.5% of white men were killed by off-duty officers (compared with 98.5% who were killed by on-duty officers).

"That says to us that the rate of off-duty police perpetrated killings of Black women diverges from broad public discourse on policing, which tends to under-estimate the overrepresentation of Black women among policing victims," said Asabor.

The researchers also found that news media outlets were three times more likely to report these violent incidents—and that officers were off duty—when the victims were Black or Hispanic than when they were white.

A qualitative analysis of the incidents revealed several other patterns.

Specifically, researchers found that officers often committed violence within their own social networks, frequently killing their family members, acquaintances, or fellow officers. Officers were often impaired during these violent episodes, with many reports noting that off-duty officers were drunk or suffering from mental illness. Reports also detailed a lack of transparency in many of these incidents, with officers obscuring or withholding information about their role in the events.

"We also consistently saw that off-duty officers were often escalating situations and intervening with lethal force in circumstances that did not seem to necessitate it," said Asabor. "And we found that there were instances where victims were in crisis of some sort, and these could be situations in which police may not actually have been well-equipped to intervene."

In many cases, the off-duty officers were moonlighting as private security officers, which the researchers say creates ambiguity about what constitutes public safety, vigilantism, and criminality.

Based on these outcomes, the researchers recommended several policies, including a requirement that officers return their service weapons when their shifts are done and a clarification of when off-duty officers should intervene.

"There needs to be clear, widespread guidance, preferably at the federal level, on what types of situations call for off-duty officer intervention and how we can document those interventions after they happen," said Asabor.

As for news reports on these types of incidents, the researchers encouraged [media outlets](#) to report on all killings by off-duty police officers, regardless of the victim's race, and to speak with a variety of sources rather than simply relying on police statements.

Better delineation of the roles of officers when they are on and off duty will be key to addressing this issue, the researchers say.

"Reconsidering officers' relationships to other citizens, particularly when they're off duty is critical for the conversation on police reform," said Asabor. "One message of our study is that there is space to reconsider the extent to which the broad deputization of off-duty police officers, in terms of their weapons carriage and their conduct, is potentially causing more harm than good."

**More information:** Emmanuella Ngozi Asabor et al, A mixed-methods assessment of off-duty police shootings in a media-curated database, *Health Services Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1475-6773.14170](https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.14170)

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