

Database expands to document police uses of lethal force across US

December 6 2023, by Phil Ciciora



Production analyst and U. of I. student worker Josh Weiner enters information into the SPOTLITE database, which documents any incident where police use firearms, including those with non-fatal outcomes and any other use of force that results in a death. SPOTLITE is a project of the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research and an interdisciplinary team of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign experts. Credit: Fred Zwicky/University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The Cline Center for Advanced Social Research and an interdisciplinary team of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign experts have expanded upon their statewide registry on the use of lethal force by police officers in the state of Illinois to include national data.

The [Systematic Policing Oversight Through Lethal-Force Incident Tracking Environment](#) project, called "SPOTLITE," identified more than 23,000 incidents of [police](#) uses of lethal force in the U.S. during the years 2014–2021. SPOTLITE includes any incident in which police used a firearm—including those with nonfatal outcomes—as well as any other use of force that resulted in a death.

The interdisciplinary team of scholars and experts spearheading the SPOTLITE project includes Scott Althaus, the director of the Cline Center and also the Merriam Professor of Political Science at Illinois; Joseph Bajjalieh, a senior research manager at the Cline Center; Jay Jennings, a research scientist at the Cline Center; Michael Martin, a senior research coordinator at the Cline Center; Jennifer K. Robbennolt, the Alice Curtis Campbell Professor of Law at Illinois; Ajay Singh, a postdoctoral researcher at the Cline Center; and dozens of undergraduate and graduate student researchers who have worked since 2017 to compile the database.

SPOTLITE seeks to improve police accountability and rebuild the public perception of [law enforcement](#) in the U.S., the researchers said.

"More than a thousand Americans die in encounters with law enforcement every year, and some studies have suggested that as many as twice that number have probably survived being shot by police," Althaus said. "But in most areas of the country we don't really know how many shooting incidents might have occurred that didn't result in deaths."

"Researchers have been clamoring for more comprehensive and [reliable data](#)," Robbennolt said. "SPOTLITE will allow researchers to look at trends and patterns across the country with an eye toward developing a better understanding of the factors that influence when lethal force is used."

After analyzing SPOTLITE data from 2014 to 2021, the researchers found that the number of police uses of lethal force incidents nationwide has been increasing. In 2014, the year of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, there were 2,443 incidents across the U.S. By 2021, there were 3,474 incidents, a 42% increase from 2014.

SPOTLITE researchers also discovered that 28% of the 3,143 counties in the U.S. had zero police use of lethal force incidents. By contrast, 50% of all police uses of lethal force in the U.S. over this period occurred within just 117 counties nationwide.

Last year, the researchers identified more than twice as many police-involved uses of lethal force in the state of Illinois than previously reported by the Illinois State Police, for a total of 694 lethal force incidents involving 734 civilians during the period 2014–2021. SPOTLITE also provided an authoritative accounting of the racial and ethnic characteristics of the civilians involved in those Illinois incidents.

Future editions of the SPOTLITE national registry will document incidents up to the present day and include details such as whether injuries or fatalities were reported, which [law enforcement agencies](#) were involved, and the racial characteristics of civilians involved in these incidents, the researchers said.

The SPOTLITE project originates from calls for police accountability and reform in the aftermath of fatal police shootings involving unarmed Black citizens.

"Communities throughout the U.S. have been pushing for reforms to address racial inequities in police uses of force," Jennings said. "But without high-quality data to authoritatively document lethal force incidents involving police, it's been difficult to have a productive conversation about reform efforts."

SPOTLITE will afford communities throughout the U.S. access to data necessary to achieve evidenced-based police reform—a pivotal first step in addressing long-standing concerns about racial inequities in community policing, Althaus said.

"The SPOLITE project is nonpartisan and nonadvocacy. Its purpose is to provide [high-quality data](#) that will enrich conversations around the country about improving accountability between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve," Althaus said. "The SPOTLITE dashboard is set up to empower communities to do their own research on each incident. These records also allow communities to review the original news reporting that document these incidents."

"All SPOTLITE data are open to the public and can be downloaded for further analysis," Jennings said. "Our goals are to provide citizens and researchers with the highest quality data and to be able to inform conversations about when, where and whether change is needed, so that those conversations can move forward with the best possible information."

There are about 18,000 law enforcement jurisdictions in the U.S., which equates to "18,000 different approaches to policing tactics, training and policy being conducted independently from one another without the ability to assess which are succeeding at reducing unnecessary uses of lethal force, and which are doing poorly," Althaus said.

Instead of relying on the smattering of data supplied by law enforcement

agencies, the SPOTLITE database culled information from local news reports of police shooting incidents to provide initial details of what happened where and to whom. The researchers also leveraged artificial intelligence and machine learning to augment the work of human analysts.

Current data-gathering efforts at the state and federal levels are "insufficient and incomplete," Singh said, with the FBI planning only to release aggregated national data that doesn't allow communities to find information on their local policing agencies, or to find records of specific incidents.

"With SPOTLITE we are able to provide communities across the U.S. with localized information on police uses of lethal force that can be found nowhere else," he said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Database expands to document police uses of lethal force across US (2023, December 6) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-database-document-police-lethal.html>

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