

Fact-Checking a Police-Shooting Database

The *Washington Post*'s Fatal Force tool can be useful, but its mistakes reinforce a false narrative.

/ Eye on the News / Public Safety

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According to Fatal Force, the *Washington Post*'s police-shooting database, Virgil J. Wolford, Jr. of Columbus, Ohio, was [killed by police](#) on April 30, 2018. Except he wasn't. Wolford, Jr. was, in fact, non-fatally shot by the Columbus police after stabbing a woman and pointing a shotgun at officers. In 2019, he received a [three-year prison sentence](#) (which he [appealed, and lost](#), in 2020). He [died in his home](#) in April 2023.

Any police use of force, especially deadly force, is a grave matter. But the reason that videos of police shootings tend to go viral is that they are quite rare—and the unjustified or even questionable use of deadly force is rarer still. Our calculations—based on the annual average of police–public contacts from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Police Public Contact Survey in 2015, 2018, and 2020, and on the annual fatal shooting counts of the *Post* database—show that police use force of any type in less than [one-tenth of 1 percent of all 911 calls](#). Less than 0.002 percent of police encounters each year result in a fatal shooting by police.

Wolford's alleged demise is not an isolated example in the *Washington Post*'s frequently cited but infrequently vetted police shooting database. Useful though the database can be, factual mistakes and omitted context about fatal police shootings indicate a sloppy approach that tends to support the narrative of an American [epidemic of police violence](#). The Fatal Force database's sins of omission and commission demonstrate how “facts,” when employed for a political agenda can be dangerously misleading—stoking anti-police sentiment and racial tensions.

Created after the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown, the database aims to track every deadly police-involved shooting from 2015 to the present. Yet the newspaper presents its data with an eye toward shaping public opinion—framing police shootings through the lens of race and the language of victimization. [Our study](#) found many such persistent myths about police shootings are based on information that isn't true.

For example, the *Post* classifies Kyle Dail, killed by police in a Dallas, Texas, convenience store in 2022, as [“unarmed.”](#) Dail was observed allegedly making drug deals at the location and fled in a car but eluded pursuing officers. About an hour later, officers tried to arrest him when he was spotted back at the store. [Dail resisted the officers](#), removed a gun from his pocket, raised it toward them, transferred it to his other hand, then tossed the weapon at the same time as an officer fired. The database even lists Dail, who was

visibly armed on the surveillance footage, as “[f]leeing by car,” despite the incident taking place inside the store.

Another example: [Fatal Force](#) lists a man named Channara Tom Pheap, killed by police in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 2019, as “Black.” Every one of numerous other [news accounts](#) identify him as Asian, of [Cambodian descent](#), including an Associated Press article printed in the *Washington Post* itself.

Other times, obtaining accurate information requires one to look past an embellished presentation. Examining the database’s featured graphics, one would never know that, of the 7,096 individuals (the *Post* refers to them as “victims”) fatally shot by police between 2016 and 2022, only one in 18 were unarmed. The database also shows that more unarmed whites than blacks were killed, a fact neither it nor the *Post*’s often-skewed [news coverage](#) spotlights.

Gaps also exist. The *Washington Post* classifies others fatally shot by police as of “unknown race,” accounting for nearly 10 percent of those killed between 2016 and 2022. After seven years, the race of 42 individuals killed in 2016 remains classified as unknown. But using readily available public databases and documents, we identified all of them. According to our research, 67 percent—or 28 people—were white; seven individuals were Hispanic, four were Native American, and three were black. Incorporating those identifications reduced population-level racial disparities in police shootings.

Fatal Force does offer a tool on its website that lets users sort and search incidents by name, race, location, armed status, and other categories. Users can download, say, a list of unarmed blacks or of those killed in Idaho in 2015. But they must dig further via its [database platform, GitHub](#), to uncover any context clues. One incident detail buried deep in the raw data is the subject’s “[threat type](#),” categorized by “shoot,” “point,” “attack,” “move,” “flee,” “threat,” “accident,” or “undetermined.”

Of the 118 “unarmed Blacks” fatally shot by police between 2016 and 2022, for example, the *Washington Post* data reveals that 51 of those killed were, in fact, attacking police or innocent civilians, 11 made a threatening movement with a visible weapon, and 18 more moved in a way threatening to officers or others. Under long-established police use-of-force rules, most of those 80 police killings were legally justified—and in most cases, independent investigators and juries agreed.

And some of those categorizations don’t tell the whole story. Probationer and registered sex offender [Mickel Erich Lewis](#)—killed by police in Mojave, California—is listed as “unarmed” on the *Washington Post* website with the threat type “move” listed in the GitHub data. In October 2020, Lewis fled from a car during a routine traffic stop, returned to the car and grabbed something, then ran toward the officer with his hand in his waistband when he was shot. A firearm was recovered nearby on scene. These are curious details to omit from the database; they give an objective observer cause to question the *Post*’s conclusion that Lewis was “unarmed.”

Fatal Force has garnered accolades, winning the [Pulitzer](#), [Peabody](#), and [Polk](#) awards for journalism. [Government officials](#) and [academics](#) often cite it. But the *Washington Post*'s data quality and presentation raise serious questions about the tool's purpose and reliability. Is it designed to inform—or inflame?

A [recent survey](#) found Americans believe that police fatally shoot [1,800 unarmed blacks](#) each year. That's 100 times more common than such shootings really are. Bad data only contribute to these misconceptions about police killings. To borrow a phrase, democracy dies without accurate information.

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