

U.S. Cops Kill at 100 Times the Rate of Other Capitalist Countries

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Global Research, January 06, 2015

[Liberation News](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Capitalist politicians here often promote the reactionary and dangerous idea of “American exceptionalism,” by which they mean that the United States is superior to all other countries. In May 2014, President Obama told graduating West Point army cadets, “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.”

One area in which the U.S. is unquestionably exceptional is the level of state violence directed against African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and working and poor people of all nationalities. U.S. police killings outnumber those in other developed capitalist countries by as much as 100-1!

How many people are killed every year by the police in the U.S.? The exact number is not known. There is no federal agency that keeps track. The FBI compiles annual statistics for “justified homicides” by police—and all reported police killings are registered as “justified” by the FBI.

But participation in reporting homicides to the FBI by police and sheriff’s departments is voluntary. Of approximately 18,000 police agencies, only about 800 provide statistics. The murder of Eric Garner on Staten Island last summer will not be counted in the FBI statistics for 2014, because the notorious NYPD has chosen not to participate in reporting.

According to FBI statistics, there were 461 “justified homicides” by police in 2013. However, the website [KilledByPolice.net](#) reported that U.S. non-military police killed 748 people in just the last eight months of 2013, and 1,100 in 2014. The KilledByPolice numbers were compiled using mainstream media sources. Actual totals are undoubtedly higher, as not all police killings are reported, and it is virtually impossible to check all of the tens of thousands of media sources in the country.

By contrast, in England, also a capitalist country with a long history of racism, police reportedly fired guns three times in all of 2013, with zero reported fatalities. Police do not carry guns on patrol in England.

From 2010 through 2014, there were five fatal police shootings in England, which has a population of about 52 million. By contrast, Albuquerque, N.M., with a population 1 percent of England’s, had 26 fatal police shootings in that same time period!

In 2011, the FBI reported 404 “justifiable homicides” by U.S. police. Based on the data collected by KilledByPolice for 2013 and 2014, the real number of police killings for 2011 was likely over 1,000. There were two reported police killings in England, meaning that the rate of killing by U.S. police was about 100 times that of English cops in 2011.

The same year, German police, who do carry guns, reportedly killed six people. Germany, another racist, capitalist country with large numbers of oppressed minorities, has a population about one-quarter that of the U.S. So on a per capita basis, U.S. police were 40 times as likely to kill as German cops.

Canada, another multi-national state with about 12 percent the population of the U.S., also reported six fatal police shootings in 2011, meaning that U.S. cops were 20 times as likely to kill as their Canadian counterparts.

Why so many more police killings in the U.S.?

What explains this huge disparity in rates of police killing between the U.S. and other capitalist countries?

Contrary to the myths propagated by politicians, mass media and schoolbooks, extreme racist, anti-worker and anti-poor violence has been a central feature of U.S. history since the country's founding. U.S. capitalism was constructed on a foundation of genocidal extermination of Native people and the unpaid labor of millions of enslaved Africans.

The first police forces were the "slave patrols" established in the early 1700s to suppress revolts, capture runaways and protect white property. Whippings, beatings, rape and other forms of torture and murder were standard operating procedures for the patrols as well as the slave owners they worked for.

The overthrow of Radical Reconstruction following the Civil War (1861-65), saw new forms of terror to suppress the formerly enslaved Black people. A "legal" network of racist sheriffs, police departments, courts and prisons worked hand-in-hand with its extralegal arm, the Ku Klux Klan lynchers. Among other features, the "Jim Crow" system provided unpaid Black labor to the plantations and industries of the South.

Along with the rapid growth of cities in the 1800s came the rise of urban police departments. The role of the police was to protect capitalist property using whatever violence they deemed necessary, especially against the organized labor movement. When the local cops couldn't handle the job, the National Guard and army could be called in, along with violent, extra-judicial organizations like the Pinkerton Detective Agency and other thug organizations, including the KKK. Thousands of workers were killed and severely injured, and hundreds of thousands beaten and jailed fighting for basic rights.

Today, the cops, sheriff's and other state and federal police agencies function as the violent defenders of a racist system of extreme and growing inequality. Every day they uphold the interests of the banks, corporations and super-rich against the interests of the people. Every day, sheriff's departments across the country throw tenants out of their homes at the behest of landlords. Never do they do the opposite.

The extraordinarily violent history of the U.S. has not ended, either internally or externally. U.S. military forces are engaged in seemingly endless war, with bases in more than 100 countries. And the police inside the United States have been heavily militarized, provided with a vast array of battlefield weaponry.

In city after city, town after town, police killings continue on a daily basis. The police in the U.S. have a virtual "license-to-kill" in defense of the vicious capitalist system that they protect and serve. No matter how blatant their crimes—even when captured on video—cops

are almost never charged, much less convicted.

Along with extraordinarily violent police, the U.S. has an “exceptional” and truly monstrous prison system. There are more people jailed in the U.S. than any other country, over 2.4 million. Next is China with 1.5 million in prison, but China has a population four times greater than the U.S. The U.S. rate of imprisonment is 737 per 100,000 people; China’s is 128 per 100,000.

The U.S. has 5 percent of the world’s population but 24 percent of all the prisoners in the world! It not only has the largest number of imprisoned human beings but the highest rate of incarceration of any country on the planet.

Reflecting the racist nature of the system as a whole, African Americans make up about 12 percent of the U.S. population but nearly 40 percent of those in prison. African Americans are more than six times as likely to be imprisoned as whites.

What can bring about an end to police abuse and mass incarceration?

In recent months, there has been an unprecedented outpouring of opposition to police murder. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets in hundreds of cities, towns and campuses. Nothing could be of greater importance.

As in all other progressive struggles throughout history, it is the movement of the people in the streets, schools and workplaces that is the key to real change.

In the long run, it will take the revolutionary socialist transformation of society to end the racism, exploitation and police brutality on which the capitalist system depends.

Richard Becker is the Western Region Coordinator of the ANSWER – Act Now to Stop War & End Racism – Coalition, and the author of Palestine, Israel and the U.S. Empire, and The Myth of Democracy and the Rule of the Banks.

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