



An In-Depth Analysis of Fatal Encounters with U.S. Law Enforcement: Dissecting the Roles of Federal, State, and Local Agencies

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KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Local law enforcement officers were responsible for 87% of fatal encounters that occurred from 2013-2023.
- ▶ In comparison to their White counterparts, American Indian individuals exhibited higher odds of fatal encounters with federal law enforcement, Black individuals faced increased odds of fatal encounters with local law enforcement, and Latinx individuals experienced higher odds in both federal and local law enforcement encounters.
- ▶ The average age of individuals who experienced a fatal encounter with federal or state law enforcement was 34 in comparison to 36 for fatal encounters by local law enforcement.
- ▶ Unarmed individuals faced increased odds of fatal encounters in federal and state law enforcement interactions, in contrast to decreased odds in local law enforcement scenarios.

ABOUT THE LAB

The Racism-based Violence Injury & Prevention Lab examines racism, violence, and trauma among Black emerging adults 18 to 29 years of age. Our goal is to provide evidence-based science that informs the development of culturally relevant prevention and intervention practices that combat racism-based violence.

OVERVIEW

The deaths of Eric Garner in New York on July 14, 2014, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, at the hands of police officers catalyzed a worldwide call for justice, shining a spotlight on systemic issues that endure. Almost a decade later, the persistent reality of disproportionate police-related fatalities involving both Black and Latinx individuals continues to confront us (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019). Following the watershed events of 2014, the uptick in lethal encounters with police has galvanized public discourse and scrutiny across the United States (Berman et al., 2020). This surge has not only provoked rigorous public debate but has also highlighted the profound effects of such tragedies on the wellbeing of communities and the nation's psyche (Motley & Baidoo, 2023; Ward et al., 2024). The ramifications of these encounters stretch far beyond the realm of social and ethical discourse, influencing wider issues of personal safety and confidence in law enforcement.

In this comprehensive report, "An In-Depth Analysis of Fatal Encounters with U.S. Law Enforcement: Dissecting the Roles of Federal, State, and Local Agencies," we delve into the prevalence and characteristics of these fatal encounters from 2013-2023, distinguishing the roles and responses of different agency levels. We combined data from Fatal Encounters and Mapping Police Violence. Fatal Encounters is a comprehensive database that documents incidents of people who have died through interactions with law enforcement in the United States, meticulously compiled from a variety of sources (Fatal Encounters, 2024). Mapping Police Violence is a research collaborative collecting data on police killings nationwide to quantify the impact of police violence in communities (Campaign Zero, 2022).

This report is crucial in shaping policy reforms and improving law enforcement protocols to foster a safer, more equitable community. By analyzing federal, state, and local agency interactions, our work provides insights into the complexities of fatal police encounters, significantly enriching the dialogue on law enforcement practices and the development of focused policy interventions.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Fatal Encounter by Federal Law Enforcement Officer

was defined as an encounter that involved an officer working in agency of the United States government, typically an agency with “U.S.” in its title (e.g., U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation).

Fatal Encounter by State Law Enforcement Officer

was defined as an encounter that involved an officer working for a state law enforcement agency. These agency titles contained the word “state”, that name of the state, or both (e.g., Oklahoma Highway Patrol, Illinois State Police).

Fatal Encounter by Local Law Enforcement Officer

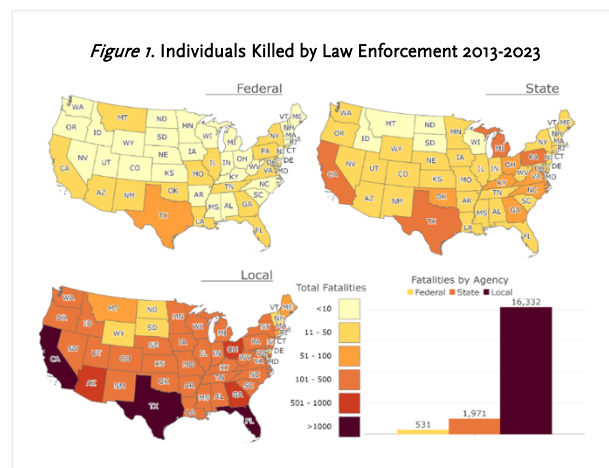
was defined as an encounter that involved an officer working for a city or county police agency. Titles of these agencies usually contained the name of the city or county (e.g., Wilmington Police Department, New Castle County Sheriff's Office).

FATAL ENCOUNTERS BY FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

In the United States, law enforcement operates on federal, state, and local levels, each with distinct but complementary roles (Conser, Paynich, & Gingerich, 2011). Federal agents, working under the executive branch in agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), focus on national security, federal crime investigation, and terrorism, paralleling state and local law enforcement in crime investigation and judicial processes (Bumgarner, Crawford, & Burns, 2023; Grenzow, 2024).

State law enforcement duties vary but generally include traffic regulation, criminal investigations, and public safety, with roles divided among various entities such as highway patrols and specialized departments like the California Bureau of Investigation (Hanson & Markovic, 2024; International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018). Additionally, they oversee state prison law enforcement. Local law enforcement officers, crucial at the municipal, county, tribal, or regional levels, handle a wide range of responsibilities from patrolling and traffic management to emergency response and crime investigation, often being the first contact in emergencies through 911 calls (Hanson & Markovic, 2024; Walker & Katz, 2017). Each level plays a vital role in maintaining safety and order, with specialization ensuring effective coverage of all aspects of law enforcement.

Figure 1 provides an in-depth analysis of fatalities caused by law enforcement agencies in the United States, encompassing federal, state, and local levels, during the decade from 2013 to 2023. This period saw an estimated 18,834 fatalities. Local law enforcement officers were responsible for the majority of these deaths, accounting for 86.7%, while state and federal officers were responsible for 10.5% and 2.8% respectively. The figure highlights that Texas recorded the highest number of incidents involving federal officers, whereas California, Texas, Michigan, and Pennsylvania were most affected by state law enforcement fatalities. Additionally, California, Texas, and Florida experienced the highest incidence of fatalities involving local law enforcement agencies.



Federal Law Enforcement

The sample of individuals who experienced a fatal encounter with federal law enforcement comprised 237 individuals (see Table 1). Most of these individuals were male (90%) with an average age of 34.2. White individuals constituted 36% of the sample, followed by Latinx (33%) and Black (26%). Also, we found that 62% of the individuals were armed at the time of their fatal encounter with federal law enforcement.

Table 1. Description of sociodemographic characteristics for individuals who experienced a fatal encounter from 2013-2023 with federal law enforcement (n = 237).

	N (%)	M (SD)
Gender		
Male	212 (90)	—
Female	25 (10)	—
Age	—	34.2 (11.9)
Ethnicity		
White	86 (36)	—
American Indian	6 (3)	—
Asian	4 (2)	—
Black	62 (26)	—
Latinx	79 (33)	—
Weapon status		
Armed	148 (62)	—
Unarmed	89 (38)	—

Note: 294 observations removed due to missing any of the above indicators.

State Law Enforcement

The analysis of individuals who were killed by state law enforcement officers included a larger sample of 1,003 individuals (see Table 2). Males accounted for 85% of the cases. The average age of individuals killed by state law enforcement was 34.8 and the majority of them were White (59%) followed by Black (24%) and Latinx (13%). In terms of weapon status, 52% of individuals were unarmed during their fatal encounter with state law enforcement.

Table 2. Description of sociodemographic characteristics for individuals who experienced a fatal encounter from 2013-2023 with state law enforcement (n = 1,003).

	N (%)	M (SD)
Gender		
Male	851 (85)	—
Female	152 (15)	—
Age	—	34.8 (14.0)
Ethnicity		
White	595 (59)	—
American Indian	20 (2)	—
Asian	21 (2)	—
Black	239 (24)	—
Latinx	128 (13)	—
Weapon status		
Armed	485 (48)	—
Unarmed	518 (52)	—

Note: 968 observations removed due to missing any of the above indicators.

Local Law Enforcement

Table 3 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of 11,257 individuals who experienced a fatal encounter with local law enforcement. Similar to federal and state, males accounted for the majority 91% of fatal encounters with local law enforcement. The average age of individuals killed by local law enforcement was 36.0. The ethnic breakdown within this group showed that White individuals accounted for 48% of fatal encounters with local law enforcement, followed by Black individuals (30%) and Latinx (18%). Additionally, the majority (66%) of individuals were armed at the time of their fatal encounter with local law enforcement.

Table 3. Description of sociodemographic characteristics for individuals who experienced a fatal encounter from 2013-2023 with local law enforcement (n = 11,257).

	N (%)	M (SD)
Gender		
Male	10,193 (91)	—
Female	1,064 (9)	—
Age	—	36.0 (13.8)
Ethnicity		
White	5,435 (48)	—
American Indian	131 (1)	—
Asian	230 (2)	—
Black	3,425 (31)	—
Latinx	2,036 (18)	—
Weapon status		
Armed	7,410 (66)	—
Unarmed	3,847 (34)	—

Note: 5,075 observations removed due to missing any of the above indicators.

Risk Factors for Fatal Encounter by Law Enforcement Agency Type

A series of three binary logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine the odds of fatal encounters with each type of law enforcement agency with a total sample of 12,497 individuals. As shown in Table 4, older individuals had increased odds of fatal encounters with local law enforcement (OR = 1.01, 95% CI [1.00, 1.01]) and slightly reduced odds of fatal encounters with state law enforcement (OR = 0.99, 95% CI [0.99, 1.00]).

Table 4. Binary logistic regression results for police killings by agency 2013-2023 (n = 12,497).

Variable	Federal	State	Local
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Male (Ref = Female)	0.90 (0.58 – 1.40)	0.92 (0.76 – 1.12)	1.09 (0.91 – 1.31)
Age	1.00 (0.99 – 1.01)	0.99 (0.99 – 1.00)*	1.01 (1.00 – 1.01)**
Ethnicity (Ref = White)			
American Indian	2.69 (1.15 – 6.27)*	1.41 (0.87 – 2.29)	0.62 (0.40 – 0.95)*
Asian	1.10 (0.40 – 3.03)	0.83 (0.53 – 1.32)	1.16 (0.76 – 1.77)
Black	1.16 (0.83 – 1.63)	0.56 (0.48 – 0.66)***	1.58 (1.37 – 1.83)***
Latinx	2.49 (1.81 – 3.41)***	0.54 (0.44 – 0.66)***	1.28 (1.09 – 1.52)**
Unarmed (Ref = Armed)	1.58 (1.11 – 2.24)*	1.41 (1.15 – 1.74)**	0.68 (0.56 – 0.81)***

Note: 4,657 observations deleted due to missingness; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

* p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01. *** p < .001.

Compared to White individuals, American Indian individuals had significantly higher odds of fatal encounters with federal law enforcement officers (OR = 2.69, 95% CI [1.15, 6.27]), Black individuals had significantly higher odds with local law enforcement (OR = 1.58, 95% CI [1.37, 1.83]), and Latinx individuals had higher odds with federal (OR = 2.49, 95% CI [1.81, 3.41]) and local (OR = 1.28, 95% CI [1.09, 1.52]) law enforcement officers. In addition, being unarmed increased the odds of a fatal encounter with federal (OR = 1.58, 95% CI [1.11, 2.24]) and state (OR = 1.41, 95% CI [1.15, 1.74]) law enforcement officers.

CONCLUSIONS

This comprehensive analysis of fatal encounters involving U.S. law enforcement underscores the disproportionate impact these incidents have on Black, Latinx, and American Indian ethnic groups. The term 'ethnic groups' denotes non-biological, social, political, and culturally constructed groups of individuals in the U.S. (Graves, 2001; Sussman, 2014; Zuberi, 2001).

It acknowledges the diversity within these groups, such as differences in region, country of origin,

socioeconomic status, language, and gender, highlighting their heterogeneity (Fields & Fields, 2012; Fought, 2011; Wilkerson 2020).

Our report reveals significant variances in fatal encounters across law enforcement agencies. Notably, local agencies and individuals from ethnic minority groups disproportionately represent these encounters. Such disparities underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive reassessment of practices and policies in our law enforcement institutions to address the systemic inequalities that perpetuate these outcomes. This reassessment must prioritize accountability and transparency, focusing on reforms that improve community relations, enhance oversight, and ensure that law enforcement officers are adequately trained to engage with diverse populations in a manner that respects human rights and dignity. It is imperative that these initiatives are guided by a commitment to justice and the protection of all community members, irrespective of ethnic background.

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