Deadly First Responders:
Cases of Fatal Police Brutality Against Mentally Ill Civilians

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Abstract

According to the Washington Post's 2015 data documenting fatal police shootings, at least one fourth of people murdered by police in the United States had a mental illness. This percentage has remained the same in 2016 and 2017. Their public database of police brutality cases analyzed trends of race, gender, location, age, and signs of mental illness. However, there are many questions left unanswered. Since police are the first responders to all mental health crises under the term "welfare check" or "wellness check", how many of these cases were prompted by a welfare check? Are these mandatory police "checks" on wellness a correlative to civilian death? How many of these individuals killed by police were suicidal? And for those who were suicidal, is there evidence that these fatal interactions were Suicide by Cop? This content analysis consists of news reports for 256 cases of fatal police shootings of mentally ill civilians in 2015. There were over 600 articles analyzed for the themes Suicidality, Suicide by Cop, Welfare Check, and Physical Threat. The data shows that over half of the 256 individuals killed were suicidal, nearly 43% of the cases had evidence for suicide by cop, and roughly 44% of all interactions were prompted by a welfare check. Race was found to be a key factor in these cases. The race of the civilian victim was found to be a crucial factor in the distribution of these statistics. These findings suggest the need for continued research on suicide by cop and the intersection of race, mental illness, and police use of force as well as an intervention for first responder policies and procedure.

1. Introduction

In 2015, 991 people were fatally shot by police in the United States. These statistics were not recorded by a public government organization but the Washington Post who have relied on local and national news reports. Among the approximate thousand lives taken by police, the Washington Post found that one fourth showed signs of mental illness). Police have been coming into contact with mentally ill civilians at higher rates since the era of deinstitutionalization and defunding of mental health services. While police themselves mark this increase as burdensome and time-consuming, these interactions with mentally ill civilians still only make up make up a very small percentage of total civilian interactions. So why were one fourth of the victims of police lethal use of force in 2015 mentally ill civilians? If police come into contact with people with mental illness at a rate as low as 1%-7%, why do they make up such a large portion of the people shot to death by police? Lethal use of force was used by police against 251 mentally ill civilians in 2015. Some victims were engaging in criminal activity, some were suicidal, some were just trying to walk home at night to see their family. A goal of this research is to understand why police came into contact with these people and what factors may have prompted police to shoot them. Will we find that race has an implication in these particular civilian deaths as well? It seems that not a day goes by without a hashtagged name marking the loss of another black life taken by police brutality. Were there differences among people of different genders? The intersections of race, gender, and mental illness will be vital in answering the following research questions:

1. Were victims with mental illness in 2015 interacting with police due to a welfare check?
2. Were any of the victims among these cases suicidal?
3. Did suicide by cop occur?
4. Are welfare checks associated with suicide by cop?
5. Were physical threats presented by the victims during the fatal altercation with police?

A review of literature on police interactions with mentally ill civilians will guide the approach to these questions. Research on the recently studied phenomena, suicide by cop, will help us understand patterns of this form of suicide and assist in conceptualizing this theme. Understanding the beliefs, practices, and assumptions of police who interact with mentally ill civilians will ground us in law enforcement standpoint and inform the analysis of these shootings.

1.1 Literature Review

Among the 256 cases recorded by the Washington Post (WaPo), several themes began to emerge such as "suicide by cop" a phrase used by officers, news reporters, and family members of victims. This seemingly well-known phenomena of suicide by cop has not been heavily researched. This lack of scholarly works may be due to the lack of data on police violence in the United States as whole. Further examination of the news sources provided by WaPo led to another key concept, welfare checks. Usually at the beginning of the article journalists would report the reason for the interaction which ended in a fatal shooting. Upon initial review of the sources, it appeared that not all of the interactions were prompted by the report of criminal behavior and officers also visited to ensure civilians were safe.

1.1.1 welfare checks

Since the ending of World War II, the United States has seen a rapid decline in mental health care. While deinstitutionalization during the latter half of the twentieth century had altruistic intentions, many civilians once receiving care and shelter were suddenly left without necessary resources for survival. This national shift away from mental health services has left law enforcement as the de facto first responders to mental health crises. Unfortunately, though the responsibility was placed upon police to handle mental health emergencies, the resources to do so have not. Several police departments around the country utilize Crisis Intervention Training, or CIT, but this training averages at only 8 hours while 60 hours are dedicated to firearm training, suggesting that police have far more adequate training on how to shoot a lethal weapon than how to aid a civilian in a mental health crisis[7]. In addition to adequate training around mental illness, the nature of the shift from health issue to legal issue may also influence officer response to treat mentally ill civilians more like offending criminals than civilians in crisis. As found in research of Canadian police interactions with mentally ill civilians, police have a propendency to assume their interactions with mentally ill folks will be prompted by public disturbance, an issue of law and criminality[2]. Response to a mental health crisis falls under the protocol "welfare check". A welfare check is a police response to a situation where a civilian may be in danger from other people or from themselves. In the instance that a civilian interaction with police is initiated through a welfare check, we can assume that this is not reflecting criminality as suggested by police assumption, but rather a call for help from the civilian or someone close to them.

1.1.2 police lethal use of force as a threat response

Law enforcement officers engage in use of force in life-threatening situations as a last resort. With this definition, the 251 civilians would have to had been presenting a lethal threat which would elicit a threat response and police would have utilized several other tactics before discharging their weapon.

So who is truly more likely to be a lethal threat in these altercations? In the study *Is Dangerousness a Myth? Injuries and Police Encounters with People with Mental Illness*, Morabito and Socia cite that although police stigma marks mentally ill suspects to be the most dangerous calls to handle, there is more likelihood of mentally ill individuals to be harmed by police than there is for mentally ill individuals to harm them[8]. Morabito and Socia conducted a content analysis of 6,131 incidents of police use of force in Portland, Oregon within 2008 to 2011 and found that mental illness paired with substance use (which many mental health professionals consider to be a form of mental illness in itself) increased police use of force by 65%[8]. However, as Geoffrey Alpert points out in his review of this research, police can only provide educated guesses about the state of an individual's' mental health status, and since this was not paid adequate attention to in the research, Alpert argues that this invalidates much of the study. However, as we will find through further literature, most of the police who interact with mentally ill civilians are not accurately informed on

the civilian's mental health status and it is through assumptions and typifications that police make decisions on how to interact with mentally ill civilians.

1.1.3 typified criminals: race and mental illness

Criminality can be projected onto an individual through preconceived assumptions around an individual's identity, such as racial identity or gender identity, or the behavior they are exhibiting. When prisons are disproportionately full of black and brown bodies, black and brown bodies become stigmatized as criminal bodies. This typification is nothing new to the United States, Michelle Alexander explains in her work "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness"[1]. The stigmatization of black people as violent and criminal began as a response to emancipation in order to continue control over black people and reduce the dissent of poor white people who were living in poverty. If poor whites could control another group of people, people of African descent, they would maintain a semblance of power and be less likely to revolt against the ultra wealthy who kept them in poverty. Black people would become the scapegoat for many issues affecting the working class which were indoctrinated by the bourgeoisie. One way to maintain a racial hierarchy to control the working class was to create Slave Patrols, law enforcement who could arrest Black people for vagrancy and force them to do hard labor for little to no pay, essentially legalizing slavery again. This is the very first amalgamation of the united states police force. This history is embedded into modern-day policing. In the twenty first century black people are killed at disproportionate rates by police and they are over-representative of the prison population which is in the millions. These factors will have an impact on the data collected by WaPo in 2015.

Criminality is also often placed upon bizarre or erratic behavior. Because police officers primarily operate as responders to criminal activity and receive most of their training through this lens, they may be predisposed to marking strange behavior as criminal rather than symptomatic of a mental illness. Patricia Lee-Griffin conducted her dissertation "The Criminalization of Individuals Suffering from Symptoms of Mental Illness: An Exploratory Study" utilizing several qualitative methods such as face-to-face interviews, surveys, and content analyses. Through her interviews with three police officers, she found that officers have difficulty distinguishing mental illness from criminality. One police officer states:

"Mental illness, I see as a sickness, and it is one that cannot always be easily determined by the actions of the person, especially in our profession as a police officer. When police are responding to a disturbance call involving an individual experiencing a crisis, any person who is exhibiting bizarre or disruptive behavior is often seen as a criminal offense, something that is going against the law."[6]

The officers also found it difficult to tell when medications were results of mental illness and stated the need for diagnostic and medication information on the civilian prior to interaction[6].

In a content analysis study by Scholenburg it was found that people with mental illness were a population with a higher tendency to come into contact with police for reasons outside of criminality or law breaking[10].

Melissa Thompson's study of defendant likelihood of psychological evaluations, she begins her literature review with attention to the social construction of criminality and the typification of criminals. She assumes her data will reveal that black US Americans to be typified as violent and less likely to receive a psychological evaluation. Without a psych. evaluation the defendant's violence and criminality is inherent and the defendant is considered fully responsible. Thompson's data shows evidence that felony defendants of African descent were 47% less likely than defendants not of African descent to receive a psychological evaluation[11]. This research provides a theoretical framework around race and mental illness within the criminal justice system However, the dichotomous coding for "African descent and non-African descent" overlooks vital information on other non-white raced defendants and what their likelihoods for an evaluation may be.

1.1.4 suicide by cop

Many of the victims listed in the Washington Post database who were coded as having signs of mental illness were also reported to have been suicidal during the time of the altercation and displaying lethal threats. These instances meet the criteria for Suicide by Cop as provided by the American Association of Suicidology. In an analysis of 240 possible suicide by cop incidents from 1980 to 1998, the three officers conducting one of the first suicide by cop studies found that 97% were male[5]. However, the 1998 study does a poor job of conceptualizing suicide by cop and they do not clarify if the victims were experiencing mental illness. Still, it is significant that a majority of individuals were men and that there may be gendered implications of suicide by cop. Within a more comprehensive analysis by researchers Christina L. Patton and William J. Fremouw, their critical review of 18 suicide by cop studies within 2004

and 2014 reveal a continuation of this male-dominant trend but offer an added analysis of victim race and other factors. Patton and Fremouw's results indicate that the typical victim of suicide by cop is a white male "younger adult" (20's-30's) displaying aggressive behavior or bizarre gestures. This study titled "Examining 'Suicide by Cop': A Critical Review of the Literature" brings to light the many difficulties of this topic of research. For one, the terminology is not consistent and some researchers utilize the terms "suicide by cop", "police assisted suicide", or "copicide" while judicial and law enforcement sectors often use "victim precipitated homicide" or "justifiable homicide". The conceptualization and behavioral criteria for coding suicide by cop also fluctuates, however thanks to Patton and Fremouw's research I am able to reference the 18 separate sets of criteria which lay a formidable foundation for my own methodology. In another case study of three individuals who successfully completed suicide by cop, it was the aiming of a weapon at the police which incited police to discharge their weapons and kill the individuals[9]. This relates back to police's immediate use of deadly force when they perceive a threat. Through an analysis of the pre-existing literature, the most frequently cited indicators for suicide by cop are when civilians call police during a suicidal episode eliciting a threat to oneself or another civilian, a physical threat, and brandishing of a weapon.

2. Methods

This research utilized an inductive approach beginning within the Washington Post database on fatal shootings by police in 2015. WaPo utilized local and national news reports as well as independent databases which were sourced under a brief description of each individual fatal shooting case. It is through these sources that content analyses were conducted. The 256 cases coded as showing signs of mental illness were evaluated in the order they were given by the interactive WaPo database. Not every case had the same amount of news coverage and some sources were inactive links with no news sources available, but for the sake of of consistency, only the WaPo-provided sources were included for content analysis. The data was entered into Google Sheets.

The coding process followed Charmaz's grounded theory approach to coding. Line-by-line open coding allowed key concepts to emerge from the data requiring theoretical sensitivity to ensure the data's "voice" is heard over the researcher's theorizing (2004). Using this method, four following key concepts emerged; *Welfare Checks*, *Suicidality*, *Suicide by Cop*, and *Threat Level*. These themes were not theoretically concise at first. For example, the instance of a victim being armed with a gun was a key concept before becoming criteria for the finalized theme *Physical Threat* and evidence of *Suicide by Cop*. It was through the cyclical process of constant comparison that eventually lead to coding schemes for all four concepts. A more in-depth review of the coding can be found in the Index, but the respective coding schemes are as follow:

2.1 Suicide by Cop

The definition of suicide by cop (SbC) for coding purposes were based on the criteria given by the American Association of Suicidology and the 18 suicide by cop studies reviewed by Patton and Fremouw:

Suicide by cop is determined by the individual's suicidal state and threatening behavior with knowledge that their behavior will elicit a lethal response from police. Cases were coded as having evidence for suicide by cop, no evidence for suicide by cop or unsure. To be coded as evidence for suicide by cop, two criteria were present with at least one of the criteria indicating suicidal ideation/intention (SbC Criteria 2 or 6) and (1) or more behavior-related criteria (SbC Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and/or 6). These criteria were found individually among several news sources or together within the same news source(s). Victims whose news sources only showed suicidal ideation/intention criteria were not considered to have evidence of suicide by cop. Victims whose news sources only showed behavior-related criteria were also excluded. Victims who met none of the criteria were not considered to have committed suicide by cop. Victims whose news sources were inconclusive were not considered for meeting criteria for the instance of suicide by cop.

Table 1. The six Suicide by Cop criterion

Suicide by Cop Criteria	Criteria description News source example
Criterion 1	<u>Verbal threat to harm self, police, or civilians</u> *"Authorities say a man with a weapon threatening customers at a northeastern Pennsylvania Walmart has been shot and killed by police."* [1]
Criterion 2	<u>Sources stating recent or current suicidal ideation</u> *"EL PASO, Texas - A 22-year-old man was shot and killed Thursday morning by police officers who responded to a report of a 'suicidal subject' with a gun at a daycare, El Paso police spokesman Mike Baranyay said."* [2]
Criterion 3	<u>Approached police with weapon/did not drop weapon</u> *"He ignored commands to keep his hands out of his pockets and pulled out what appeared to be a handgun."* [3]
Criterion 4	<u>Victim calls 911 and reports a false emergency</u> *"[Officer]Blackwell said Kim was responding to two 911 calls about a man with a gun. The caller reported that the subject was belligerent and in his early 20s, wearing a white T-shirt with a gun tucked in his waistband. 'We now know that the caller himself was the shooter of our officer,' Blackwell said at a Friday night news conference."* [4]
Criterion 5	<u>Physically attacking police with or without a weapon</u> *"Police officials cited the brutality of the roughly five-minute melee that preceded the shooting on Saturday. Mr. Felix ripped a police radio from one of the detectives and used it to 'bash their head's, one official said."* [5]
Criterion 6	<u>Asks police to kill them</u> *"The male subject yelled, 'Shoot me, just shoot me,' multiple times as he continuously walked toward [the officer]."* [6]

2.2 Threat Level

The threat level coding scheme will code the physical threat(s) presented by the victim during their fatal altercation with police. Coding for physical threat will identify the literal threats an officer's life which were presented by the victim as opposed to behaviors that may be perceived as a threat such as bizarre behavior often associated with disabled civilians. Because police can only discharge their firearms as a last resort in a life-threatening altercation, this theme will be used to quantify how life-threatening the altercation was for officers. *Physical threat* for this research utilized three of the behavior-related criteria for suicide by cop and two additional criteria.

Threat level was measured on a scale of 0-5 with *Threat Level: 0* representing no physical threat present and *Threat Level: 4* representing all four of the four possible physical threats present. The physical threat criteria included were: *Armed With a Gun* and (3) of the behavioral criteria from the coding scheme for Suicide by Cop.
Physical Threats:

  1.) Verbal threat to harm self, police, or civilians (SbC Criterion 1)
  2.) Approaching police with weapon, aiming gun, not dropping weapon (SbC Criterion 3)
  3.) Physically attacking police with or without a weapon (SbC Criterion 5)
  4.) Armed with a gun

The physical threats will be put into two categories during analysis: low physical threat level where 0-1 physical threats were displayed, and high physical threat level where 2-5 physical threats were displayed. When a police

officer's report of a physical threat is contested, we will still code the physical threat. These instances will provide insight into the officer's reasoning and when contested these cases will be marked in the codebook.

2.3 Welfare Check

Welfare checks among this population are instances where the fatal altercation with police was instigated by a call from family, a bystander (most frequently neighbors), or the individual themself asks for assistance during a mental health crisis. Mental health crises include any symptomatic behaviors of a mental illness which threaten the life of an individual or the people around them, including suicide. Cases were considered to have been initiated by a welfare check when their respective news sources indicated that the victim or someone else called police due to a mental health crisis or the police were described to have visited to "check on the welfare" of the victim, conducting a welfare visit, welfare call, "checking up on", or otherwise indicated by the terms wellness check or welfare check. Cases were not considered to have been initiated by a welfare check when news sources stated an alternative reason for police interaction. Within this population, at least one news source per victim revealed the initiation of the lethal altercation. Cases were coded as unsure when there were no news sources available.

Table 2. Criteria for Welfare Check

Welfare Check	Yes	No
Example	*"The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation says Washington County sheriff's deputies received a call about a suicidal man at a rural home in Wellman off Highway 22."* Kcci.com, Martin Francis Hammen, 39	*"Police were called to the home at 1702 S. 50th St. just before 5 p.m. Tuesday after a report of an assault in progress."* Omaha World Harold, omaha.com Tiffany Terry, 49

2.4 Suicidality

Suicidality determines if the victim of a fatal police shooting was suicidal during the interaction or within a recent period of time beforehand. For this study, "recent" is operationalized as within the timeframe of a month prior to the shooting. This definition emerged as a trend among individuals within these cases that were denied in-patient psychiatric care or whose family or friends reported "recent" suicidal ideation that approximated a day to a few weeks. Suicidality was frequently determined by a request for a welfare check from someone other than the victim, self report of suicidal ideation or a plan of suicide, and an active attempt during the fatal interaction. The cases were coded as yes when this evidence was found within at least one article, no if there was no evidence found within any articles, and unsure when articles were missing or speculation of suicidality with no evidence were featured.

Table 3. Suicidality Criteria

Suicidality	Yes	No
Example	*"A Monroe-area man shot himself in the head during a confrontation with a Snohomish County sheriff's deputy last month, according to newly released court records."* Heraldnet.com, Rikki King. June 11th, 2015 Millard James Tallant III, 62	*"A 24-year-old man held a screwdriver and a wrench in each of hands when he confronted two Las Vegas Metro police officers who fatally shot him."* Fox5vegas.com, Matt Guillermo. August 12th, 2015 Abel Correa, 24

3. Results

The content analysis consisted of 671 news articles for the total 256 victim cases. The data collected offered several insights in regards to welfare checks, threat level, suicidality, and suicide by cop. The most profound trends were found when stratifying by race. Only two gender categories were reported in the news sources provided, male and female. The population of women and men were significantly skewed. Only 6% of the dataset consisted of women, a stark contrast to the general population of women in the US at 50.8% according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The races of the victims were not reflective of the diversity of race and ethnicities among the general population of the United States. The dataset included Asian American, American Indian, Black, Latinx, Middle Eastern, white civilians and civilians whose race and/or ethnicity was unknown to news sources. The categories Asian American, Middle Eastern, and American Indian were merged into the category Other due to the small size of the populations. The majority of the dataset, 160 of the total 256 cases, consisted of white victims followed by 39 Black victims, 37 Latinx victims, 14 victims of Unknown race/ethnicity, and 6 victims whose races/ethnicities were coded as Other. Trends among both racialized and gendered victims varied.

3.1 Suicide by Cop

"*Did suicide by cop occur?*" We can confidently answer that, yes, there were cases which contained evidence for suicide by cop and these cases made up a significant portion of the population. Approximately 42.96% (*N=110*) of all cases of fatal police shootings in 2015 had evidence for this method of suicide.

Table 4. Total Themes

	Suicide by Cop	Suicidal	Welfare Check	Physical Threat
Yes	42.96% N=110	51.17% N=131	43.75% N=112	87.5% N=224
No	57.03% N=146	45.31% N=116	53.12% N=136	11.71% N=30
Unsure	0% N=0	3.51% N=9	2.34% N=6	<1% N=2

There were no cases where it was unclear if evidence for suicide by cop were present. Several victims mentioned their plan to commit suicide by police before the fatal altercation took place, showing that this method and its terminology have reached the general public. David Wheat Jr., 22 years old, white and male, had told his brother that he was going to commit suicide by cop right before he ran at the neighbors who were on the phone with 911 dispatchers. Douglas Yon, white, male, and 25 years old from Kent, Ohio was another victim who told bystanders that he had planned to commit suicide by cop by "running at the police when they arrive". Even just running towards the police with no weapon, Douglas was seen as a lethal threat. Was this due to his "bizarre and disruptive behavior" as the officer in Lee-Griffin's study claimed?[5] Was Douglas's behavior a threat to authority or to the officer's life? This calls to question how "life-threatening behavior" is defined by police.
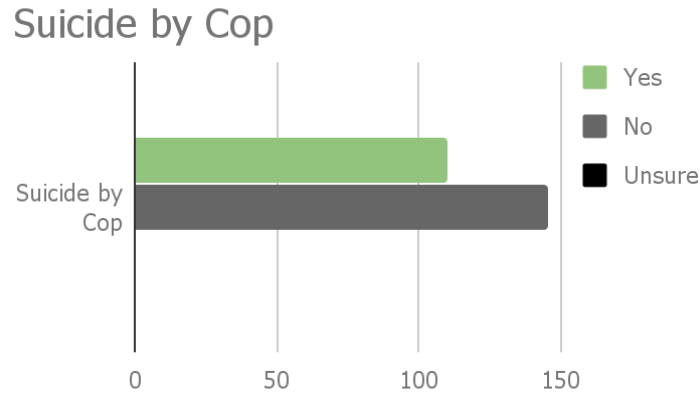
Figure 1. Suicide by Cop

Trends emerged from the data when comparing cases by the victim's news source-identified racial/ethnic category. Of the total population, approximately 72% (*N=79*) of those killed by police were white. Latinx victims made up 13.63% of the total cases with evidence of suicide by cop and, Black victims made up 7.27% of this total. None of the victims whose race/ethnicity were within the Other category showed evidence for suicide by cop. The largest percentage of suicide by cop within an identified racial/ethnic category were also white people at 43.75% (*N=70*). Following were cases with Latinx victims at a slightly lower 40.54% (N=15). There was a significant decrease in cases with evidence of suicide by cop among cases with Black victims of police brutality. Only 20.51% of all cases of fatal police brutality among Black victims showed evidence for suicide by cop. From this data, we can deduce that most white mentally ill individuals shot by police were shot because it was their intention to be killed while a majority of Black mentally ill civilians' lives were ended against their will. This may due to the typification of Black people as criminal and threatening which does not exist for white people. These results indicate that white civilians may have greater control of the outcome of an interaction with police compared to non-white civilians.

Cases provided insight not only to the likelihood of occurrence of suicide by cop, but told stories of how failed institutions and desperation may be a factor to why civilians utilize suicide by cop. Many of the victims who were people of color had evidence of a prior interaction with police. Miguel Martinez, a Latinx young adult of only 18 years of age was pulled over for speeding one evening in June of 2015. Miguel and his friend in the passenger seat, Daniel Dankert, were arrested for allegedly having a gun and "drugs" (presumably marijuana as the following quote implies) in the car. Miguel and Daniel found a way to drive away in the police cruiser they were chained inside of and a high-speed chase ensued. According to WFAA local news, Miguel told dispatchers:

"*I'm just a stoner, and I wanted to get away from all this. When I was in 9th grade, I went to jail. My mom decided not to pick me up when she could have. I can't go back to jail. My brother can't go back to jail. I really wanted closure with my mom before I went to fucking prison for like 10 or 20 years.*"

He repeatedly told dispatchers that if they didn't stop chasing him, he was going to kill himself. The dispatcher replied saying there's no way he's "getting out of this" without him going to jail. When they stopped, Miguel's gun went off before he stepped out of the car. As he exited the cruiser, police shot him on sight.

Miguel was mentally ill, and yet most of his young adult life he spent in a jail cell rather than with experienced therapists and a support system. There is a lack of mental health resources available to mentally ill civilians while many private and public funding is allocated to the prison industrial complex. There were consistent cases of individuals who were unable to receive treatment for their mental illness and ended up in the justice system when mental health episodes occurred. The prison system further traumatizes individuals and the conditions prisoners are forced to live are inhumane. Many mentally ill prisoners often end up in solitary confinement, defined by many as a tactic of torture. For Miguel, between the choice of prison or death, death was the better choice.

The case of Jonathan Guillory Garcia was just as bleak. Guillory was a veteran who had run ins with the law on and off for erratic behavior, a symptom of his mental illness.Garcia's wife said her husband proactively sought help for his condition and was let down time and time again:

"He saw therapists, and was on the phone constantly with suicide hotlines," she said. Guillory's widow said he went to the VA hospital, where he reported he was having a mental health emergency. "They turned him away. They told him there was no room, and that he'd have to make an appointment," Garcia said. "I think the system failed him," Garcia said. "It was a huge disappointment for him to come in and have doctors say they couldn't fit him in an emergency appointment, that they didn't have anything, that they were totally booked up."

David Lucier, founder of the Arizona Veterans and Military Leadership Alliance added that this is an all-too-common occurrence for veterans.

For 21 year old Black young adult male Trepierre Hummons, the state, an institution which economically underserved his neighborhood and whose justice system racially profiled him and his neighbors, failed him since he was a child. Battling racism alone is traumatizing and leads many people of color to depression. Trepierre was dealing with a toxic racist environment compounded with a mental illness which lead him in and out of prison throughout his life. This sense of hopelessness and a toxic environment is what family, friends, and caseworkers believe drove Trepierre to suicide.

"A lot of individuals want to say we have the mental capacity to deal with things and not everyone has the same mental capacity to deal with the end result, especially when I'm dealing with a system that has never come out favorable for a person who looks like me," director of Hamilton County Office of Re-entry DeAnna Hoskins explained. *"How does being born into poverty, how does living in communities that don't have economic viability, that don't have job opportunity outlooks, how does that play into an individual's opportunity to hope and dream?"*

Trepierre Hummons committed suicide by cop, calling 911 several times reporting a false emergency of a "belligerent man with a gun" who turned out to be him. Within fifteen minutes of the police arrival, Trepierre was killed. Local reverend Rev. Peterson Mingo lamented: *"He just found himself in a situation where he didn't think he had any way out,"*
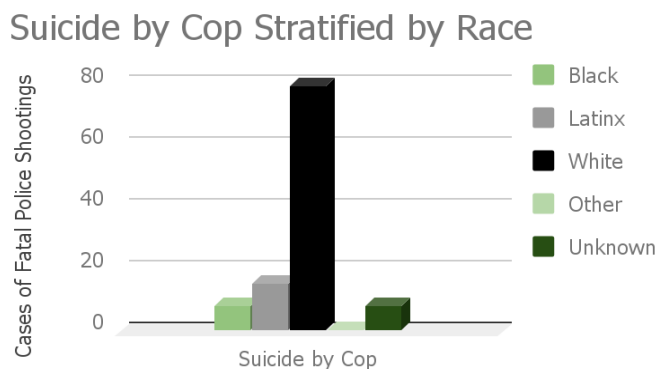

Figure 2. Suicide by Cop Stratified by Race

The majority of the cases with evidence for suicide by cop involved white victims. Although the total population of cases of fatal police shootings of a mentally ill civilian have a majority of white victims, Table 5 below shows the proportional data of suicide by cop by race and total cases by racial/ethnic category. The data reveals that cases with white victims are proportionally more likely than cases with victims of another race to display evidence of suicide by cop.

Table 5. Suicide by Cop by Race/Ethnicity and Total Race/Ethnicity Populations

	Black	Latinx	White	Other	Total
Suicide by Cop by Race/Ethnicity	7.27% *N=8*	13.63% *N=15*	71.81% *N=79*	0% *N=0*	42.96% *N=110*
Total Pop. by Race/Ethnicity	15.23% *N=39*	14.45% *N=37*	62.5% *N=160*	2.34% *N=6*	100% *N=256*
Proportion SbC% / RacePop.%	20% *8/39*	40% *15/37*	49% *79/160*	0% *0/6*	

When stratifying by gender, there appears to be no correlation between evidence of suicide by cop and a mentally ill civilian's gender. Of the 16 women in the population, 43.75% of their cases showed evidence for Suicide by Cop. This percentage was similar to the rate of Suicide by Cop among the 240 men, at 42.91%. However, the majority of the population of victims who utilized SbC were white men, consistent with the results found by Patton and Fremouw.

3.2 Welfare Check

Were 2015 victims with mental illness interacting with police due to a welfare check? Are welfare checks associated with civilian death? The data reveals that fatal encounters with police in 2015 were indeed initiated by welfare checks. A total 43% of all fatal police brutality victims were engaged by police during welfare check. (see Figure 4 below). This suggests that welfare checks are associated with civilian death and civilians who utilize welfare checks may be at risk of police lethal use of force. Police conduct welfare checks not because it is a primary part of their job as law enforcement, but because the reduction of mental health services overtime has left them with this responsibility. Furthermore, since the primary duty as law enforcement officers is to enforce the law, police interactions with disobedient or erratically-behaved civilians may influenced by the nature of their occupation and the increased likelihood that they will be addressing criminality. These results also mirror the literature on typifications of criminality and police lethal use of force against mentally ill civilians. This data proves that the typification of mentally ill civilians by police is false and mentally ill civilians are not inherently more dangerous because more than half of the altercations were not initiated by a criminal offense, but by the need for assistance as Scholenburg claims.

Welfare Checks are shown to be associated with Suicide by Cop. A total of 82 of the 110 cases with evidence for Suicide by Cop, or 74.5%, were initiated by a Welfare Check (see Figure 4 below). This marks welfare checks as an instrumental factor of suicide by cop during a mental health crisis since welfare checks are the sole initiator of police first response. Alexander Myers, like several other victims, had fired his gun aimlessly when police arrived outside his home before being fatally shot by several officers. Firing in the direction of, not directly at, officers was a commonly used behavior of suicide by cop when officers arrived outside for a welfare check. In every case but three cases, police were not severely injured by suicide victims and the attacks and behaviors seemed to only have one purpose: urge police to discharge their weapons and complete their suicide.
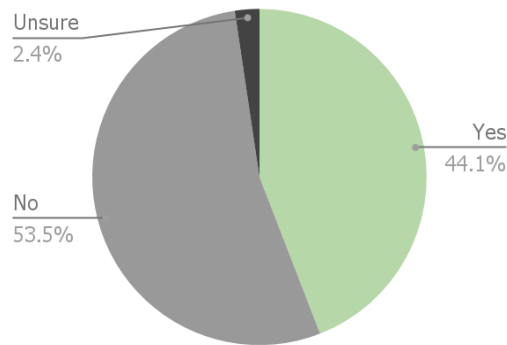
Welfare Check

Unsure 2.4%

Yes 44.1%

No 53.5%

Welfare Checks among Cases of SbC

Unsure 0.9%

No 24.5%

27

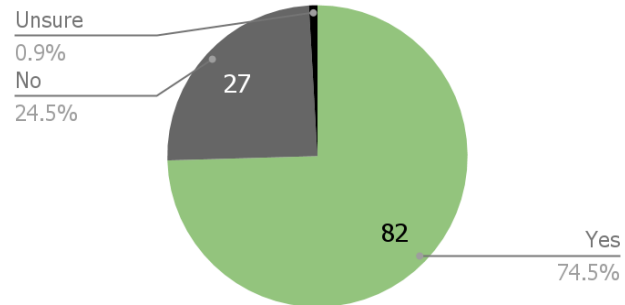82

Yes 74.5%

| Figure 3. Welfare Check | Figure 4. Welfare Checks Among Cases of SbC |

3.3 Suicidality

Of the total 256 victims, 131 victims were suicidal. With over half of the population experiencing suicidal ideation or intention, there is a correlation between suicidality and a fatal encounter with police among civilians with mental illness. Exactly 50% of the women in this population were suicidal while 51.25% of men were suicidal showing that gender was of little impact of suicidality. Of the racial and ethnic categories, white victims had the highest rate of suicide. Following white victims (56.25%) were Latinx victims (48.64%) and Black victims (35.89%). This high rate of suicidality among police brutality victims marks the needs for alternative methods of first response.

Suicidal

150

131

116

100

50

9

0

Suicidal

■ Yes
■ No
■ Unsure

Figure 5. Suicidal

3.4 Physical Threat

The lethal use of force by police is justified as a response to a lethal threat or to stop a felon from escaping a crime. Physical threat aims to quantify the victims' lethality during their fatal altercation with police. Reflecting on the research question *Were physical threats presented by the victims during the fatal altercation with police?*, the data showed that a majority (N=137) of victims were recorded as displaying a low physical threat level, (one or no physical threats). 28 cases showed the victim displayed no physical threats and 109 cases showed the victim displayed only one physical threat. The most common physical threat was approaching police with a weapon or not dropping a weapon. The weapons varied from rocks to assault rifles with a majority being less-than-lethal weapons such as pellet guns, bricks, and butter knives. It is important to note, that many of the families and witnesses contested police reports of victims attacking police or being armed.

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When comparing by race and ethnicity, the population most likely to display 2 or more physical threats were cases with white victims. The least likely to display 2 or more physical threats were cases with a Black victim. Cases with Black victims of a fatal police shooting were the most likely to display no threats at all when compared to white and Latinx populations. White victims presented 2 or more physical threats 49% of the time. Black victims' cases as recorded by news sources displayed 2 or more physical threats 25.63% of the time, Latinx victims displayed 2 or more physical threats at a rate of 29.72%, victims whose race/ethnicity fit into the Other category displayed 2 or more physical threats 16.66% of the time, and victims of unknown race/ethnicity displayed 2 or more threatening behaviors 27.9% of the time. It is important to reflect back upon the suicide by cop data when looking at these statistics. Most of the white population of victims were killed through demonstrating threatening behaviors and most of the white population demonstrated 2 or more threatening behaviors to elicit a threat response to complete their suicide. Cases where the victims were Black were ten times more likely than white victims to be shot to death against their will, and this population of victims also rarely displayed high physical threat levels (2-5 physical threats present). Without mimicking threatening behavior or engaging in physical altercation, there must be another element among this population that is met with fear or aggression strong enough to incite lethal use of force. This brings us back to the typified criminal and the US narrative of the "black male criminal". Michelle Alexander marks the chronicling of this typification from the beginning of the Reconstruction Era where the film *Birth of a Nation* painted the picture of black men as violent, threatening, criminal, and sexually predatory and the KKK as heroic soldiers against this evil "criminal". Overtime the term "criminal" became coded for "black" within law enforcement, news coverage, and politics. Black people didn't necessarily need to display physically threatening behavior to be killed because US authorities have marked them as "criminal" for generations.

The likelihood for little to no physical threats still remained for non-Black people of color as well and yet again they were met with extreme brutality. Only 29.72% (N=11) Latinx victims displayed 2 or more behaviors perceived as a threat by police and were still met with bullets. Ruben Joe Herrera, 26 years old, male, Latino, was brutally beaten when police responded to a welfare check at his home in Los Angeles California:

"*The man's mother said Sunday that Ruben had been sitting and putting air in his bicycle's tires when police arrived, and that he cooperated with them. Police responded by beating her son — using pepper spray, a Taser on him twice, and socking him multiple times in the face and back, she said. "My son was doing everything he was told. I told them to stop. My son was bipolar. You know, 'please, don't hit him,'"*

Graciel Herrera said. "He (an officer) just told me to shut up and go inside."

From these findings we can conclude that race is a key factor in how mentally ill civilians are treated and their likelihood of death by police use of force is much more likely to be justified with minimal or no physical threat presented to officers.

3.5 Themes and Typified Criminals

Like Trepierre, many of the individuals who committed suicide by cop reported an individual who was exhibiting bizarre behavior or behaved bizarrely themselves. This behavior that is linked to mental illness elicited a lethal response from police. It can be inferred that this erratic behavior is criminalized and the behavioral symptoms of mental illness are in turn criminalized.

There was one case where a victim was charged a felony for attempted murder during a suicide attempt. 15 year old Zane Terryn and girlfriend 16 year old Morgan McNeill planned to commit suicide together when they were stopped in their car by a state trooper. Zane fired his gun in the direction of the trooper and the trooper returned fire killing Zane instantly. Morgan then attempted to drive away but crashed into a boat. Morgan was charged with the attempted murder of a law-enforcement agent and second-degree murder of Terryn and was held without bond. The Florida Highway Patrol Major Tod Goodyear explained "Since a person died while she and the deceased suspect were in the commission of a felony crime, she was charged with felony murder". The felony crime in this situation is suicide. The 16 year old Morgan McNeill was not only charged with the murder of her boyfriend when it was the state trooper involved who killed him, but she was also being charged for her and her boyfriend's attempted suicide.

This criminalization of suicide adds a new element of analysis to the data. It is at state discretion that suicide is decriminalized, but historically suicide was considered a felony in the United States. This history of criminalizing suicide may have impacted the way police interacted with this population of mentally ill civilians, over half of which were suicidal. When police engage with criminal behavior, their defenses are heightened and this is true of those who fit within typified criminal depictions: Black civilians, mentally ill civilians, and suicidal civilians as well.

Table 6. All Themes Stratified by Race/Ethnicity

Race/ Ethnicity	Suicide by Cop	Suicidal	Welfare Check	Physical Threat Physical threat 0=PT0, Physical Threat N/A=PTN/A Number of Cases of Physical Threat 0=N_0
Black 15.23% N=39	20.51% N=12	35.89% N=14	30.76% N=12	PT0-23.07%, PT1-51.28%, PT2-17.94%, PT3-7.69% N_0=9, N_1=20, N_2=7, N_3=3
Latinx 14.45% N=37	40.54% N=15	48.64% N=18	43.24% N=16	PT0-16.21%, PT1-54.05%, PT2-24.32%, PT3-2.7%, PT4-2.7% N_0=6, N_1=20, N_2=9, N_3=1, N_4=1
Other 2.34% N=6	0% N=0	16.66% N=1	16.66% N=1	PT0-33.33%, PT1-50%, PT2-16.66% N_0=2, N_1=3, N_2=1
Unknown 5.46% N=15	57.14% N=8	57.14% N=8	71.42% N=10	PT0-40%, PT1-26.66%, PT2-20%, PT3-6.66%, PTN/A-6.66% N_0=6, N_1=4, N_2=3, N_3=1, $N_{N/A}$=1
White 62.5% N=160	43.75% N=70	56.25% N=90	45.62% N=73	PT0-8.12%, PT1-41.87%, PT2-39.37%, PT3-8.75%, PTN/A->1% N_0=13, N_1=67 N_2=63, N_3=14, N_4=2, $N_{n/a}$=1
Total 100% N=256	42.96% N=110	51.17% N=131	43.75% N=112	PT0-10.93%, PT1-42.5%, PT2-30.46%, PT3-7.81%, PT4-1.17%, PTN/A->1% N_0=28, N_1=109, N_2=78, N_3=20, N_4=3, $N_{n/a}$=2

3.6 Themes and Race/ethnicity

There were significant differences noted in the codebook regarding cases where the victims were people of color. The recorded treatment of the victim, the length of the altercation, the physical threat level, and the information included in the news reports varied drastically from white victims. More often than not, people of color's altercations were shorter than white victims. For example, Stanley Watson a white 72 year old man whose case had evidence of suicide by cop involved a stand-off with SWAT that lasted several hours. Watson barricaded himself in his trailer and posted on Facebook that he had killed his wife and their dog. His Facebook post read: "*17 years of marriage down the tube. Killed Dakota and [name redacted] tonight. Now in police standoff with swat outside the door. Hope they kill me!*" Watson's and several other white male victim cases included an altercation that lasted several hours, even when police knew the victim had committed murder and/or had displayed several physical threats. Meanwhile, interactions with people of color and specifically black men such as Quintonia LeGrier lasted only moments before police turned to lethal use of force. Quintonio, a 19 year old college student home for Christmas in Chicago, had bipolar disorder and was experiencing a violent episode. He was carrying a baseball bat and threatening to hit his father. No attacks were actually made, but still Quintonio's father wanted to make sure his son was safe and requested a welfare check from police. In fear that his son would be harmed, he asked his neighbor downstairs who had shared their apartment door if she wouldn't mind keeping a lookout for when officers arrive. The officers knock, the neighbor, 55 year-old Bettie Jones, opens the door and without even a minute to pass the officers fire their weapon on Bettie and Quintonio who was standing behind her. They both died almost immediately.

What threat could Bettie have possibly posed? What about Quintonio, who was standing several feet behind Bettie nowhere near the officers, made him a lethal threat? Quintonio LeGrier and a majority of the Black victims had no intention of dying, and yet, in minutes long exchanges, their lives were taken.

The case of Douglas Harris, 77 year old Black man in Birmingham Alabama was similar. "*There had been some reports of some dementia with the individual. And so the officer went up with the fire department to assist knocked on the door, and the gentleman came to the door and presented a firearm. And so at the time the officer had to respond immediately.*" Though the officers knew the man had dementia, the immediate response when met with a gun was lethal use of force with a firearm. Several white victims were first asked to lower their weapons then attacked by police using a less-lethal weapon such as a taser or stun gun.

Victims whose altercations were initiated by a welfare check but who did not display threatening behavior were more often than not people of color. Lavall Hall, 25 year-olds, black, and male was shot to death by officers when responding to a welfare check requested by his mother in Miami Gardens, Florida. Lavall was walking outside in the cold in his underwear when his mother became worried for his safety. He was shot at by the police five times after refusing to drop the handle of a broomstick. Lavall's mother had no intention for her son to die that night and a week prior had requested a welfare check for her son resulting in a safe escort to a hospital for psychological evaluation and care. NAACP representatives stated within the online news report by NBC6: "This is why this mother called. She did the right thing. What she called for was assistance from police never knowing that this would be the last time that she would see her son." Dashcam and body camera video and audio were released after the shooting where you can hear Lavall Hall's mother crying out "please, don't hurt my child, please." Just seconds before the officers shoot, one of the officers can be heard saying "He's walking with a broom and he's walking around in his underwear. Every time I go near him, he walks away". Police Chief Johnson defended the officers in an interview with the Miami Herald stating "They did the best they could." What was threatening about a broom handle and a young man in his underwear in the cold? The words from the officer just before he shoots Lavall reflect expressions of frustration and agitation with his noncompliance rather than fear for his life. This leads me to believe that use of force may also be used as a reprimand when officer authority is not respected. This altercation with Lavall lasted only several minutes long.

Victims of fatal police shootings who were people of color, most commonly Black, were also more likely to have their criminal record recorded in the news sources, even when no such record existed. The mention of a criminal record framed the victims in a different way that many of the white victims whose records were left out of the news report. Even mentioning a background of crime, whether one existed or not, shaped the story of the Black victims as repeat offenders and reflects the typification of Black people as criminal and violent. However, the data shows that white victims were far more likely to display high levels of physical threat, yet these white victims were more likely to be framed as victims rather than perpetrators.

3.7 Themes and Gender

There was a small population ($N=16$) of women in comparison to men. However, these cases were still taken into account as the table below displays. The largest group of women by race were white women. Over half of the white women (58.33%, $N=7$) in the population were suicidal, their cases had evidence for suicide by cop, and their interactions were initiated by a welfare check. One of the two Black women were suicidal and both womens' interactions were initiated by a welfare check. Women in general were slightly less likely to display high level of physical threats. The relatively minor population of women with evidence of suicide by cop reflects the study of Kennedy, Homant, and Hupp where only 3% of their population of suicide by cop victims were women. The small population of women in the total population may be due to the sexist typifications of men more often viewed as criminal and dangerous and women more often viewed as mentally ill and non-threatening.

Table 7. All Themes by Gender and Race

Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Suicide by Cop	Suicidal	Welfare Check
Black	Men N=37	21.62% N=8	35.13% N=13	27.02% N=10
	Women N=2	0% N=0	50% N=1	100% N=2
Latinx	Men N=36	41.66% N=15	50% N=18	44.44% N=16
	Women N=1	0% N=0	0% N=0	0% N=0
Other	Men N=6	0% N=0	16.66% N=1	16.66% N=1
	Women N=0	N=0	N=0	N=0
Unknown	Men N=13	61.53% N=8	61.53% N=8	69.23% N=9
	Women N=1	N=0	N=0	100% N=1
White	Men N=148	48.64% N=72	56.08% N=83	44.59% N=66
	Women N=12	58.33% N=7	58.33% N=7	58.33% N=7
Total Women	N=16	N=7	N=8	N=10

4. Discussion

The data reveals that police are deadly first responders. The police's role to conduct welfare checks correlate to police shootings of mentally ill civilians. This research also details the shortcomings of police in interactions with suicidal individuals which accounted for over half of the mentally ill victims of a fatal police shooting in 2015. Evidence for suicide by cop was present in nearly half of the population proving that the lethality of police is so pervasive that behaviors which elicit a lethal response are replicated to then complete suicides. Nearly one thousand civilians are killed a year by police using guns alone. This database and the subsequent databases do not include the many other civilians killed by police through different means.

  The narratives within the news sources also lead to a larger story especially in regards to people of color. Much like the aforementioned Birth of a Nation, the police narratives given in news sources painted the police who shot Black civilians as brave, heroic, and at the very least good guys who made a simple mistake. Police narratives in particular were dominant within many news articles, and when family and witnesses provided contradictory evidence, their voices appeared more like side notes or commentary. Another narrative that appeared in almost every article was criminalization of the victim and painting the victim as a repeat offender. This narrative often justified police lethal use of force and garnered sympathy for the officers, portraying them as the victim of a mentally ill criminal who they

had no choice but to kill. These narratives, given by police and family members, are worth analyzing in further content analyses.

A subset of the population which frequently emerged but was not stratified for in the coding scheme were veterans. Their physical and mental health is often dependent on the state through Veterans Affairs which have a long track record of inadequate care and maltreatment. Veterans, a population at a high risk of mental illness due to combat trauma, made up a large portion of the sample population within this research.

The Washington Post has continued to collect data on victims of fatal police shootings and their database for 2016 and 2017 are available. However, WaPo failed to include news sources in the following years making a longitudinal study near impossible. It would be worth contacting the Washington Post to continue this research. The data collected for 2016 and 2017 does indicate a trend where a quarter of the population of victims are mentally ill. This proves that these killings have not ceased and as long as the current use of force and engagement with mentally ill civilians continues, the body count will only continue to add up.

5. Implications

This research offers insight into the nature of lethal use of force among an often overlooked and at-risk population. People with mental illness have little to no social safety net as it is, and as we can see with the rates of deadly shootings, police are deadly, ineffective first responders. The key findings suggest that welfare checks may be a dangerous option for assistance through a mental health crisis, but this is more often than not the only option for US Americans. In order to increase the likelihood of mental health care and decrease the likelihood of civilian death, I would propose that a large portion of police funding be allocated to mental health sectors so mental health professionals may assist individuals in mental health crises. Pairing civilians in crisis with medical professionals and social workers with training in de-escalation and non-lethal defense against physical harm, these civilians can receive mental health treatment while first responders also remain safe. Removing police from the equation would remove the possibility of suicide by cop. The likelihood of a violent or dangerous encounter on part of the victim may also decrease. Criminal typification of mentally ill civilians and the framing of mental illness as criminal would also be lessened if police were no longer first responders to mental health crises. Allocating funding to public mental health care so mental health professional become the first responders would be a first step in solving these problems.
However, this still does not take to task the racism embedded in the police force. The results of this study deduce that the race of nonwhite individuals may have been more threatening than the physical threats presented or their mental health status. There is much work to be done in addressing the racism among the US justice system.

Firstly, we must address the shootings which have already taken place. There has been no accountability held to the officers who killed the mentally ill civilians in 2015 outside of grassroots movements. All of the officers who killed civilians with mental illness in 2015 were given paid leave from work, none of them arrested or fired from their jobs. Families and communities had to work tirelessly to try and put these officers on trial, but none of them were tried. In the news sources, the victim's families pleaded for reform or for someone to care, but how can reform happen when police are killing people by the thousands with no consequence? I hope that this data sheds light on some of the key themes such as welfare checks. It is not common knowledge that police are the legal first responders to mental health crises and this is something I believe all civilians need to know, especially those with a mental health diagnosis. There are existing alternatives to calling the police such as the Mobile Crisis Hotline which can be utilized as opposed to calling 911. However, the most common procedure is to either call the police or to call a therapist or doctor who are legally obligated to contact police themselves. Suicide by cop is happening around the country at a significant rate among mentally ill civilians. With this knowledge, another flaw of the policing in this country which leads to suicide by cop such as lethal use of force. When someone can count on a legal method of murder to end their lives, we must call into question why it is legal and what brought us to this point.

6. Conclusion

This research illuminates the deadly situation of police acting as first responders to a civilian in a mental health crisis and the under researched instance of suicide by cop. This research also explains how race is a key factor within the occurrence of suicide by cop. Where 42.96% of the cases had evidence for suicide by cop, a majority of these cases, or 71.81%, the victim was white. White people are far more likely to utilize suicide by cop than People of Color showing that of the cases where the victim was white, many of these victims had the goal of dying while most People of Color were shot and killed against their will. The history of police brutality against People of Color and in particular

Black people may influence this disparity. Race was also a key factor in the theme Threat Level. Evidence from this research suggests that it is more likely that multiple physical threats be present for white civilians to be deemed dangerous enough to shoot, while People of Color may only have one physical threat present, if any at all, to elicit a lethal threat response from police. We can theorize that non-white race or ethnicity is perceived by police as a type of threat following Melissa Thompson's theory of Typified Criminals where the typification of criminality, non-white race, is perceived by police as a greater danger than any actual physical threat presented by the civilian. This typification of criminality is negated by the evidence of physical threat where white people presented the most physical threat and potential danger during their fatal altercations. The data reveals that welfare checks, the procedure where police visit a civilian to assist them in a mental health crisis, are potentially lethal. Of the cases where a mentally ill civilian was shot and killed by police in 2015, over half, or 54%, were initiated by a welfare check. This also provides evidence that more often than not, mentally ill civilian interactions with police are not due to criminality, but as a response to a call for help, negating the typification of mentally ill civilians as criminal. Of the cases with evidence for suicide by cop, 73% of these cases were initiated by a welfare check showing that welfare checks are instrumental in the completion of suicide by cop and police are indeed deadly first responders.

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