

Police Shooting Innocent People Is One of the Most Common Forms of Gun Violence—It's Time We Understood That

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When police officers recklessly shoot civilians, they are contributing to gun violence.

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A high-profile shooting in Virginia this week targeting congressmembers dominated headlines and sparked more debate about gun control in this country.

But the Virginia shooting was not the only instance of gun violence to occur this week; data from the Gun Violence Archive shows that there were at least four other shootings across the U.S. since the attack at the Virginia ball field.



On Wednesday, a disgruntled employee shot and killed three people before turning the gun on himself at a UPS facility in San Francisco. Four more people were shot that same day in Canton, Ohio. The next day, one person died and three were injured at a shooting at an apartment complex in Richmond, Virginia. All of the victims were young adults. And in La Madera, New Mexico, a man went on a shooting rampage, resulting in the deaths of five people over the course of three hours.

Aside from the UPS shooting, these incidents did not incite a flood of media coverage or moral outrage from the public as the Virginia shooting did, suggesting a dangerous public apathy toward gun violence, save for a mass shooting that results in numerous deaths or one with high-profile targets. The reality is that gun violence is scarily common in the U.S. Research shows that the U.S. has more gun homicides than any other rich country, primarily because the U.S. has many more guns per capita than any other country.

But there is another problem with how people frame gun violence. When most Americans think about the issue, they picture a civilian committing the shooting. It is often the case that police shootings, incidents where law enforcement officers pull the trigger on civilians, are left out of the conversation on gun violence. But a police officer shooting a civilian counts as gun violence. Every time an officer uses a gun against an innocent or an unarmed person contributes to the culture of gun violence in this country.

A 2015 analysis by the Washington Post found that 1 in 13 gun killings in the U.S. were committed by police officers. In 2016, 963 people were shot and killed by police, according to a Washington Post database. When breaking down the races of the people killed by officers, Native Americans and black people are fatally shot at disproportionately higher rates than members of any other racial group. According to data from Mapping Police Violence, police killed at least 308 black people in 2016. The trends have been similar this year, with 447 people so far being fatally shot by police officers.

What is even more egregious is the number of officers who are not held accountable for their actions. In looking at police shootings stretching back to 2005, only 54 officers have been charged with a crime. The majority were either cleared or acquitted of the charges in court.

On Friday, a jury acquitted Minnesota police officer Jeronimo Yanez of second-degree manslaughter in the shooting death of Philando Castile, a black man. Yanez fatally shot Castile during a traffic stop last year after pulling him over because he thought Castile matched a profile of a robber the police were looking for. Castile was not the suspect, and had not committed any crime when he was shot. During the trial, Yanez defended his actions by saying he feared for his life.

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