

# Deaths by police can and must be reduced

The “Deadly Force” investigation by CBC News released last week, chronicling deaths in which police were involved across Canada from 2000 to the present, was as shocking as it was unsurprising.



Toronto teenager Sammy Yatim was shot to death in 2013 by a Toronto policeman. (THE CANADIAN PRESS)

By [\*\*STAR EDITORIAL BOARD\*\*](#)

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The [“Deadly Force” investigation by CBC News](#) released last week, chronicling deaths in which police were involved across Canada from 2000 to the present, was as shocking as it was unsurprising.

“In deadly encounters with Toronto police, more than a third of victims are black,” ran one headline. Said another: “Most people who died in police encounters in Manitoba were Indigenous.”

As Robyn Maynard, author of the recent book *Policing Black Lives*, tweeted: “This is not news.”

What might be news, however, was research showing that of the 460 people who died in encounters with police in Canada in the 21st century, a substantial majority – 70 per cent – suffered from mental illness or addiction. Many were under the influence of drugs or alcohol when killed.

Alarming, the rate at which Canadians, most typically those who are ill or marginalized, die in encounters with police has nearly doubled in the last 20 years.

If such information is appalling to consider, it is instructive to note that no government agency has maintained national statistics on police-involved fatalities, despite the truism that unless and until performance is measured it seldom improves.

Those who spoke to CBC journalists during the investigation underscored the frustration of seeing death after death with little change or consequence.

Jennifer Lavoie, a criminologist at Wilfrid Laurier University’s campus in Brantford, said, “it’s definitely getting worse.”

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Lack of resources for the mentally ill has led to more incidents between police and those in distress, she said, and police likely view such people – as does most of society – as dangerous.

Jackie Christopher, whose son O’Brien Christopher Reid, a chemical engineering student, was shot and killed by Toronto police in 2004, said that for all the inquests done after all such deaths, “absolutely nothing has changed.”

Still, the investigation did find that some forces, such as the Hamilton Police Service, are doing better at dealing with the challenge.

In Hamilton, the report said, a special unit established in 2013 includes mental-health professionals and emphasizes connecting those in distress with medical and community services.

For people in distress, barked orders to “calm down!” are often the least effective de-escalation tactics.

“There’s so many times that these individuals don’t need to go to hospital, they don’t need to be arrested,” Hamilton Sgt. Steve Holmes told CBC News. “They just need somebody to talk to. It’s about dialogue. It’s about slowing down the situation. De-escalating the situation.”

Police have time to wait, he said. There’s seldom reason to act as if a confrontation must be resolved in order to fit into a 30-minute TV cop show.

As Heather Thompson, whose son Ian Pryce, a 31-year-old Toronto man suffering from schizophrenia, was shot to death by police in 2013, said, the solution doesn’t lie just with police, but with changed attitudes in society and enhanced support from government. “It’s on all of us.”

In the absence of national statistics, CBC News – which gathered information from inquests, coroners’ reports, investigation unit reports, media reports and other public records – has done the country a service in producing a database it says is the first of its kind.

In all, there’s a banquet’s worth of food for thought in the Deadly Force data.

And with black people making up about 8 per cent of Toronto’s population during the period studied, yet accounting for 37 per cent of those killed in the city, CBC News chose a propitious week to release its investigation.

Last Monday, Nomzamo Zanyiwe Winifred Madikizela – an anti-apartheid icon best known to the world as Winnie Mandela – died in Johannesburg. Two days later, the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was commemorated.

If anything, the passing and the memory of two celebrated fighters for racial justice – providing background to the Deadly Force report – highlighted how very slowly the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

