

Police Involved Homicides in Ohio, 1959-1988

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The study of homicides of and by law enforcement officers and security guards has been hampered by significant problems with respect to the collection of data on this population of events. Prior studies have found that the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports, the National Center for Health Statistics' National Vital Statistics System, and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Death in Custody Reporting Program suffer from substantial underreporting and lack sufficient detail of homicides committed by and against law enforcement. Using data from 1959 to 1988 from our pilot project on Ohio, which seeks to improve the quality of homicide data in the nation from 1959 to the present, the essay will compare the coding of police homicides across multiple data sources, including department-level police records, Ohio Department of Health mortality records, death certificates, the F.B.I.'s Supplementary Homicide Reports, the National Center for Health Statistics mortality statistics, coroner's reports, and newspaper articles. My colleagues and I are creating a clustered random sample of all known homicides in 36 counties in Ohio, 1959-present, including police involved homicides and homicides of law enforcement officers. The paper will then discuss the rates, circumstances, and changing character of homicides involving police officers in Ohio from 1959 through 1988, through analysis of the more than 400 such homicides from the first three decades of our study.

I am not yet prepared to present my results in a two-to-four page abstract. I can say, however, that the results to date have been surprising. From 1959-1967, when officers were allowed to shoot at fleeing suspects, 40 percent of all victims of police-involved homicides were shot while fleeing arrest, even though they had not used or threatened violence against an officer or a civilian. And the rates were identical for blacks and whites – 40 percent of all victims. New protocols were put in place in the late 1960s and early 1970s to require that suspects pose a clear and present danger to officers or civilians before lethal force could be used. The outcome? By 1979-1988, only 12 percent of the victims of police involved homicides were shot while fleeing and unarmed. But once officers were required to decide whether a fleeing suspect posed a threat, racial bias emerged. Black suspects who were fleeing and unarmed were twice as likely as white suspects to be killed.