



ACLU Update: At Least 21 People Died in Police Custody in Maryland in 2015

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BALTIMORE — In 2015, there were at least 21 individuals killed in police encounters in Maryland, according to a new briefing paper released today by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Maryland, which found that 81 percent of those killed were Black, nearly half of them were unarmed, and every single one of the unarmed individuals killed were Black. One of those individuals, of course, was Freddie Gray in Baltimore, whose death greatly intensified an already growing movement in Maryland for police accountability reform, now being considered in Annapolis.

“Even as police custody deaths continue and demands for reform grow more powerful, we have seen little evidence that Maryland police departments are engaging with the issue on a systemic level,” said Sonia Kumar, staff attorney for the ACLU of Maryland. “Police agencies must commit to valuing the sanctity of all human life, regardless of race or class, and doing what it takes to infuse that into the culture, policies and practices of their agencies. Maryland leaders can help them take a step in this direction by passing strong, statewide police accountability reform legislation.”

“Marylanders, and particularly communities of color, have long lived with the reality of unchecked police abuse,” said Sara Love, policy director for the ACLU of Maryland. “The public is rightfully demanding a seat at the table to ensure that officers who have committed wrongdoing are appropriately disciplined. Law enforcement has shown, time and again, that they are unable to police themselves. This session, the General Assembly must reform the Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights to ensure that civilians have a meaningful role in the disciplinary process.”

Summary of Findings for 2015

1. At least 21 people died in encounters with police in Maryland in 2015.
2. These deaths occurred all over our state—no region is immune.
3. About 81% of those who died in police encounters were Black, nearly half of them unarmed. Maryland’s population is about 30% Black.

4. Every single unarmed person who died in Maryland in 2015 was Black.
5. About 38% of the people who died were unarmed.
6. Nearly half of those who died presented in a way that suggested a disability, substance use, or mental health issue of some kind. Nearly all of these individuals (about 90%) were Black.
7. Although the leading cause of death was gunshot wounds, there were at least three instances in which someone died almost immediately after being tased.
8. In 20 out of 21 cases, no criminal charges were filed. In several cases, the reviewing State's Attorney stated publicly that the killing was justified.
9. It was impossible to determine whether any officers were disciplined for misconduct in these cases due to the uniform practice of police departments in refusing to release such information.
10. In most cases, there was little or no follow-up evident in the mainstream press after the initial reporting. Typically, there was very little information about the person who died other than a run-down of prior criminal charges.

The jurisdictions in which individuals were killed in 2015 include: Anne Arundel County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Cecil County, Charles County, Frederick County, Howard County, Montgomery County, Prince George's County, Washington County, and Wicomico County.

In the briefing paper released last year, the ACLU found that between 2010 and 2014, at least 109 people died in police encounters in Maryland. Those deaths were dispersed throughout 18 different jurisdictions across the state. Other key findings for that time period showed that nearly 70 percent of those who died in police encounters were Black, more than 40 percent of those who died were unarmed, and police officers were criminally charged in less than two percent of the 109 cases cited by the ACLU.

The ACLU began compiling information about police custody deaths after learning that state officials do not track these cases. Now, there is a new statewide law, passed in 2015, mandating police report such deaths; the first reports are to be released on October 1, 2016.

QUOTES FROM VICTIM FAMILY MEMBERS

Mildred Fisher, whose son Winfield Carlton Fisher III went to the Salisbury Police Barrack on March 18, 2014 to have a rear tag light inspected and was shot and killed by the Maryland State Police: "The actions of 'shoot now and apologies with a smack on the wrist with pay' regardless of what crime or injustice they have committed, needs to stop. I don't apologize for speaking the truth; I just pray something will be done to end the injustice. It is evident that 'some' of our law enforcement officers have not kept to their commitment to Serve and uphold the law for all abiding citizens! It's very visual that there are different standards taken in handling civilians who have committed the same crimes. Our African American people are shown all over the news, but seldom do we see pictures of our Caucasian people exposed as often, nor their names mentioned."

Tawanda Jones, whose brother Tyrone West was killed during an encounter with Baltimore City Police officers on July 18, 2013: "Looking at the high number of African-Americans killed I would be remiss not to say black lives matter. We are more than hashtags and body bags. I will continue to fight for our lives until the end of time. The police need to be above board in doing right, not above the law."

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