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Book Review

David Baker (2021) *Police-Related Deaths in the United States,* Lanham MD: Lexington Books

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The topic of deaths resulting from contact with the police has become a heated political issue in recent years following several high-profile killings across the United States (US). There have been riots, indictments, civil claims and even successful prosecution as a result of the elevation of this issue to national prominence. This prominence is to be welcomed, but it comes with its own challenges. Increasing one's understanding of this complicated issue can be intimidating. The volume of media reports of shootings and the complex criminal and civil litigation that follows can be as confusing as it is depressing. The topic of police-related deaths, particularly the shooting of young black men by white officers, has generated acres of newsprint, and these acres appear to refresh themselves almost weekly. It can be hard to understand how to stop and pick it apart.

This is the challenge that David Baker has undertaken in his timely monograph. The work demonstrates a deep understanding of the policing literature, and his empirical study is carefully embedded within this. That empirical study is based on the interviews of relatives who lost loved ones in police-related deaths. It is a rich body of data drawing on interviews with 58 relatives about 43 deaths in 16 states.

The book itself is structured around vignettes of seven individuals' deaths caused by police, each forming the basis for discussion in each of the book's seven chapters. The seven victims of police violence are deliberately selected to be diverse in age, gender and ethnicity. It would have been easy to focus on those deaths that have received the greatest attention and made the greatest political impact, but Baker has instead selected cases the reader is much less likely to be familiar with. The effect of this decision is to help develop the sense that police-related deaths are a routine element of the state–citizen relationship. The vignettes and the literature also help Baker to examine different aspects of the problem that arise in each of the different cases. He goes on to challenge many of the myths that arise when somebody is killed by a police officer. For example, police leaders often justify killings as difficult decisions taken in the

course of a dangerous job, but Baker points to research showing that policing is less dangerous than logging, steel-working, construction and fishing.

Evidence is not always the easiest thing to provide in developing one's understanding of police-related deaths. Although we know how many officers were killed in a given year, we do not have good data on how many people were killed by police. There is a lack of data on the topic, and this is as shocking as it is obfuscating. The amount of data retained by the US Government and technology firms on all the tiniest aspects of people's daily lives is staggering, yet the US Government is unable to tell us how many people die in each police department each year. They cannot tell us which police departments have use of force policies and what they contain, or which forces provide first aid training to officers. Before we can begin to understand the problem, we must start to quantify the basic facts underpinning it.

The author is not afraid to spread his critique for this lack of data beyond those state agents who traditionally gather statistics. Noting that much of the quantification that has taken place has been the work of journalists, he argues that the academic study of policing has not shown much imagination or gumption in collating data or developing alternative ways to quantify the problem. Scholars often rely on secondary evidence when making their arguments and analyses. Baker's assessment of this failing reads as a measured but much-needed call to arms.

Notwithstanding the lack of data, Baker sets out a number of ways in which police-related deaths could be reduced. Some are very straightforward, such as the development of use of force policies, elimination of recruiting officers with poor previous records, better use of data to reduce risky scenarios or remove high-risk officers from particular roles, and advanced first aid training for all police officers.

Other reforms involve a rethinking of what the police might be. Conceptualising the police as 'crime-fighters' or 'the maintainers of order' engenders a confrontational style that might be undermined by a framing of the police role as 'public safety officer'. An officer, the idea goes, that is focused on public safety as opposed to fighting crime may be less likely to kill a person they are supposed to be keeping safe.

Another way to approach the problem of police-related deaths is to move away from the conception of it as a criminal justice policy issue and consider it as an epidemiological problem. There is clearly a plague of deaths across the US each year, and its patterns and reasons are predictable. Its excess deaths are preventable. A healthcare perspective might be a better way to approach the reduction or elimination of these unnecessary killings.

Alongside these proposals for practical reforms and conceptual realignments, Baker is not afraid to find the reasons for many of these deaths in the structure of US society, which has historically failed to invest in the healthcare and education of swathes of the population. If I could add one thing to Baker's list of bigger picture reforms, it would be the repeal of the Second Amendment allowing for the 'right to bear arms'. To those of us who have lived in countries with lower levels of gun ownership and gun violence, the US situation often looks like a grotesque cartoonish hyper-reality.

In the end, the great value of Baker's book is that in one volume, he has synthesised an incredible amount of competing arguments, data, personal stories and analyses of the problem of police-related deaths in the US. He has covered many aspects of the process, from criminological literature on traffic stops to legal discussions on prosecuting homicidal police officers. All of these areas have decades of detailed scholarship, but each provides a piece of the analytical jigsaw that is the study of these preventable deaths. Here, in one book, those debates are brought together coherently in a way that is accessible to readers from any disciplinary background (or none).

There is a lot of information and discussion about this topic from all sides of the political spectrum, and it can be hard for even a committed follower of these issues to parse out the important arguments, nuance

and details. Baker's book does that with great perspicacity. It is a must-read for anyone interested, however peripherally, in policing in the US and beyond.

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