



# LICENSE TO KILL

Civilian Deaths due to Police Use of Force in Puerto Rico, 2014-2020



CERRO • KILÓMETRO

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## Executive Summary

**License to Kill** is a report prepared by Kilómetro Cero in response to the Puerto Rico Police Bureau's (PRPB) lack of accountability for police use-of-force deaths, as demonstrated in the agency's continued refusal to divulge information related to these cases and to submit it to both institutional and public scrutiny. Police use-of-force deaths are not an inevitable consequence of policing, but rather an urgent problem that can and should be attended to and remedied, by way of governmental and citizen action. These deaths must be treated as priorities in the public policy agenda for security, public health, and human rights in Puerto Rico.

**License to Kill** draws from multiple sources of information (government documents, interviews with friends and families of victims, newspaper reports, information retrieved from social media as well as from the demographic registry's database) to estimate, analyze and explain the magnitude of the death toll left by police use of lethal force. As an exercise in critical public policy analysis, this report does not in any way condition its findings on whether the use of lethal force was justified, or whether

the responding officer was on or off duty, or if the officer was a member of the state or municipal police. Included in this report are deaths caused by officers' use of their service weapon, by their use of Tasers, as a result of vehicular pursuits, and those occurring while victims were under police custody. The report also includes instances of intimate femicides, where officers have killed intimate partners or former intimate partners with their government-issued firearms, as well as those instances where officers have taken their own lives with their service weapon. The inclusion of these last two types of cases is significant as they are purposely shielded from public view by the PRPB. Furthermore, accounting for femicides and suicides committed by officers exposes the institutional negligence of the PRPB in not adopting the adequate institutional mechanisms that would allow for the identification of officers who should not be armed, as they put other people's lives and health, as well as their own, in danger.

## Main findings

This is the first study that documents and offers statistical analysis of civilian deaths resulting from police use of force in Puerto Rico. It includes mortality rates to identify the most vulnerable sectors among the Puerto Rican population, thus making comparisons— at the national and international levels— possible. During the period under review, 2014-2020, there were 71 police use-of-force deaths, for an annual average of 10.

The mortality rate for police use of lethal force in Puerto Rico is 3.1 deaths per one million inhabitants.

### ● An Alarming proportion of unarmed victims

Among the 46 people killed by police discharging their service weapon (the report excludes intimate partner femicides and suicides), 43% percent of victims were not in possession of a firearm. In the US, these cases amount to only 16%. The high number of victims without a firearm indicates that it is possible to reduce civilian deaths by use of police force without putting officers at risk.

### ● Puerto Rico, too much like an anomaly in the US

The mortality rate for police discharging their service weapon (excluding intimate femicides and suicides) is 2.0 in Puerto Rico, lower than the rate

in the US (3.0), but considerably higher than that of other industrialized nations such as Canada (0.98), New Zealand (0.20), and England (0.05).

● **The Most at-risk populations:  
The young, the poor, and non-college attending individuals**

Mortality rates for police use of force is higher among men (5.7), persons between 20 and 29 years old (8.4), and among non-college-, or technical school-, attending individuals (4.0).

● **The Most at-risk communities: Racially diverse and poor neighborhoods**

Police use lethal force selectively. The report shows how the most socially disadvantaged sectors in Puerto Rico are disproportionately affected by police violence. The mortality rate for police use of force is higher in poor neighborhoods (3.5) than in non-poor neighborhoods (2.5). Racially diverse neighborhoods (those where less than 66% of residents identify as exclusively white) have a higher mortality rate than Puerto Rico as whole, regardless of whether they are situated in poverty-stricken areas (4.8 vs 3.3). Furthermore, data suggests that differences in the racial composition between neighborhoods are more significant than differences in social class when it comes to risk of death by police use of lethal force. As such, the mortality rate for residents of racially diverse and poor neighborhoods is more than double than that of those who live in white and poor neighborhoods.

● **The Institutionalized invisibility  
of intimate femicides perpetrated by police officers**

During the period under review, three police officers killed their intimate partners or former intimate partners with their service weapons. The Puerto Rico Police Bureau shielded these killings from view by not including them in their official statistical reports and has proven to be negligent by failing to attend to instances of gender violence amongst its officers.

● **A Problem of underreporting:  
The police report fewer deaths**

The Puerto Rico Police Bureau releases partial, and/or otherwise incomplete information pertaining to deaths resulting from gunshot wounds, nor does it keep track of the following: 1) deaths resulting from officer's

use of Electronic Control Devices or ‘Tasers’, 2) civilian deaths under police custody 3) deaths caused by municipal police officers 4) officer suicides. The scant information that the PRPB begrudgingly parts with—and only because of direct legal action— registers only 36% of all police use-of-force deaths in Puerto Rico.

## Public policy recommendations

### ● Reduce the number of deaths related to use of force

The Puerto Rico Police Bureau must adopt a public policy goal of significantly reducing the number of deaths related to police use of force.

### ● Institutional changes to attend to police impunity

The Puerto Rico Police Bureau cannot continue to investigate itself, nor can such an important task be carried out by governmental bodies and agencies, such as the Special Investigations Bureau, which operate in close contact with the PRPB. An independent civilian and technical oversight board is necessary for the proper evaluation of each killing and wounding resulting from police use of force. Additionally, there is an urgent need to establish a special prosecutor’s office in matters of police violence. Police use-of-force deaths should be immediately referred to the proper health authorities for investigation and the information obtained should be made available to the public.

### ● Social change

Kilómetro Cero cautions against any legislative measure intended to facilitate the acquisition and/or possession of firearms by and among civilians, because it would be incompatible with the goal of reducing the number of deaths resulting from police officer’s use of their service weapon.

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