



CASE STUDY

THE COUNTED

Project description: Through video, interactives, investigative journalism, crowdsourcing, and deep audience engagement, *The Counted* (theguardian.com/us-news/series/counted-us-police-killings) sought to create a database of Americans killed by police. No government agency, including the FBI, tracks this information. The ultimate goal was to combine this data with personal histories to raise the level of national consciousness of the magnitude of this crisis in criminal justice.

Launch date: March 2015

Funders: The project was entirely funded by *The Guardian's* core editorial budget.

Production team:

- Jon Swaine, Oliver Laughland, Jamiles Lartey and Ciara McCarthy, Reporting
- Kenan Davis, Rich Harris, Nadja Popovich and Kenton Powell, Design and Production
- Mary Hamilton, Mike Barry, Jessica Lee and Sarah Eberspacher, Community Maintenance and Moderation
- Valerie Lapinski, Laurence Mathieu-Léger and Mae Ryan, Video

- Tom McCarthy, Additional Reporting
- Sarah Gilbert, Pictures
- Maraithe Thomas and Tom Gottlieb, Copy editing
- Katharine Viner and Lee Glendinning, Editing

Festivals and awards: Not reported

TARGETS

Engagement goals: The team wanted the government to take action and start accurately tracking and monitoring deaths by police. Team members also wanted local police municipalities held to account in a way that would bring about reform in their precincts.

Target location: Nationwide

Target audience:

- 1) A general audience of American readers recently introduced to concerns about police shootings and the use of other deadly force after the unrest in Ferguson in 2014;
- 2) An audience of broadly 16–35-year-old nonwhite readers sympathetic to Black Lives Matter and the surrounding protest movement since Ferguson, Eric Garner, and other similar incidents; and
- 3) Researchers, academics, and police theorists frustrated by the lack of comprehensive data on the use of force by police—data that would be useful in their work.

USER ENGAGEMENT

Platforms: Online and mobile

Users: Currently over 8 million views of *Counted* stories and 3 million views of the database.

Social media:

- Facebook: www.facebook.com/TheCounted (21,000 likes)
- Twitter: twitter.com/thecounted (16,000 followers)

Efforts to reach particular demographic groups:

The team sought audiences that were impacted by deaths by police and who could fill in the data and contribute to the story. Readers identified an additional four deaths by police not recorded anywhere else.

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR AND AWARENESS

Goals: The team sought to humanize the victims through broad awareness of the issue. But the primary concern was to get attention from the U.S. Government and to spur it to take action.

What happened: The project featured stories of all who had been killed; identified deaths previously unmentioned in media through readers; and commanded attention from the head of the FBI, attorney general, Senator Dianne Feinstein, and many local police districts. The team hoped the government would create their own database and take action, but neither have happened yet. The project resulted in deep, expanding, and committed readership. Unfortunately, project leaders have not been able to find outside funding, so the Guardian has continued to support it with its core editorial budget.

Evaluation strategy: *The Guardian*, as a regular course, polls readers to understand their reactions and the impact that journalism has on them.

Press examples:

- Interactive database and map, tracking every death across the country for the first time. This prompted promises from the Justice Department and FBI to overhaul their systems. www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database
- “The County,” a five-part multimedia series on Kern County, CA, which *The Counted* identified as having the country’s highest rate of killings by police. This prompted protests in Kern and demands for reform.

theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/01/the-county-kern-county-deadliest-police-killings

- A four-part, in-depth series on trends revealed by the data — police killing people in moving cars despite federal guidelines designed to prevent such deaths; shootings being ruled suicides, allowing officers to skirt scrutiny; dozens dying after being shocked by Tasers despite related regulations; 87.5% of inquiries into killings by police being tainted by conflicts of interest: theguardian.com/us-news/2015/sep/01/moving-targets-police-shootings-vehicles-the-counted

User participation in ongoing development:

700,000 people have signed up to receive newsletters and updates. All of these readers are updated on new content, developments, etc.

From the project’s launch, the reporting team has been assisted by a community of digital subscribers. Built from scratch on social media, this group now totals 38,000. These participants have submitted thousands of tips on fatal incidents, photographs of people killed, and backstories on cases. Each submission was taken on for verification by reporters. This input has helped reporters identify people killed by police who had never before been named publicly. *Guardian US* journalists have also consistently interacted with this audience on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit in order to bolster engagement and steadily improve the quality of data. Reporters frequently answer readers’ inquiries about the project directly and have held Facebook live video question-and-answer sessions to discuss their findings with users in real time.

Other evidence of behavior change: The team identified an audience and gave it an outlet where none previously existed. The producers created a community of 2 million people around this content and topic. FBI Director James Comey stated in October 2015 that it was “unacceptable” for *Guardian US* to have better data than his own officials, which attracted more interest from Washington-based audience more concerned with

policy. This was boosted further by the Justice Department announcing that it would launch a new program for counting deaths caused by law enforcement—a program that draws on the *Counted* data and mirrors its methodology.

Throughout the year, new high-profile deaths involving police across the country brought readers from new areas to the project. Much interest was generated by the cases of Samuel DuBose in Ohio, college football star Christian Taylor in Texas, and six-year-old Jeremy Mardis in Louisiana. Regional media cited the data in coverage of their states and cities to provide context on the subject, which had been impossible before. The controversial delayed release late last year of video footage of the fatal shooting of Laquan Macdonald in Chicago in 2013 also sharply increased attention on the issue, along with coverage by *Guardian US* of the brutality by Chicago officers in an off-the-books jail facility.

POLITICAL IMPACT

The team did not set out with explicit political goals. However, this site spurred new proposed legislation, attention from the head of the FBI and AG, and was frequently referenced in Congressional testimony.

INNOVATION

Platform innovation: The project is built on the existing *Guardian* platform and lives prominently on its US digital front. The most innovative part of the project was the way the team identified readers who were connected to the story.

Replication: The team is looking to build new projects that fill a void of an absent database or cases where crowd-sourced data is essential to telling a complex and important story.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Not reported