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LDF Issues Statement on Study Detailing the Mislabeling and Undercounting of Police Killings Across the Country

Yesterday, the University of Washington released a new study finding that more than half of all police killings between 1980 and 2019 were mislabeled and uncounted. The study also found that Black men are disproportionately killed by police and that, compared to men of other races, Black men's deaths are disproportionately mislabeled by coroners or medical examiners.

In response to the study, Janai Nelson, Associate Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), issued the following statement:

"The University of Washington study underscores a reality that Black Americans have long known, often through traumatic experience: the scourge of lawless police violence, which has threatened Black communities for generations, has been seriously underreported. As the study indicates, police violence against Black people is even worse than the mainstream discussion of the issue would suggest.

"This is not the first time underreporting and misclassification of police killings has been detailed in a study. Harvard University found that more than half of U.S. deaths in 2015 were not documented on death certificates, often because coroners or medical examiners failed to mention the role of police in certain killings.

"As alarming as the mislabeling of police killings is, it also does not account for the many other instances of police brutality inflicted on Black communities. Police violence remains a destabilizing crisis in our multiracial democracy, one that is disproportionately experienced by vulnerable Black communities, including men, women, persons of all genders, and children. The mislabeling of police killings found by this new research is a crucial indicator of the systemic problems that obscure the truth regarding this ongoing crisis of police brutality — especially in law enforcement's interactions with Black people, and it must stop."

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation's first civil and human rights law organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.

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