

James Jones' Unarmed Black Male: exploring human stories behind the numbers of police brutality

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In 2015, police officers killed 1,146 people in the United States, according to [The Counted](#), the Guardian newspaper's online project documenting police killings. The vast majority were by gunshot, and one in five victims were unarmed. Of the total number, 193 (16%) were African American males aged between 15-34, despite representing just 2% of the general US population. The rate of police-involved deaths for this group is five times higher than for white men of the same age.

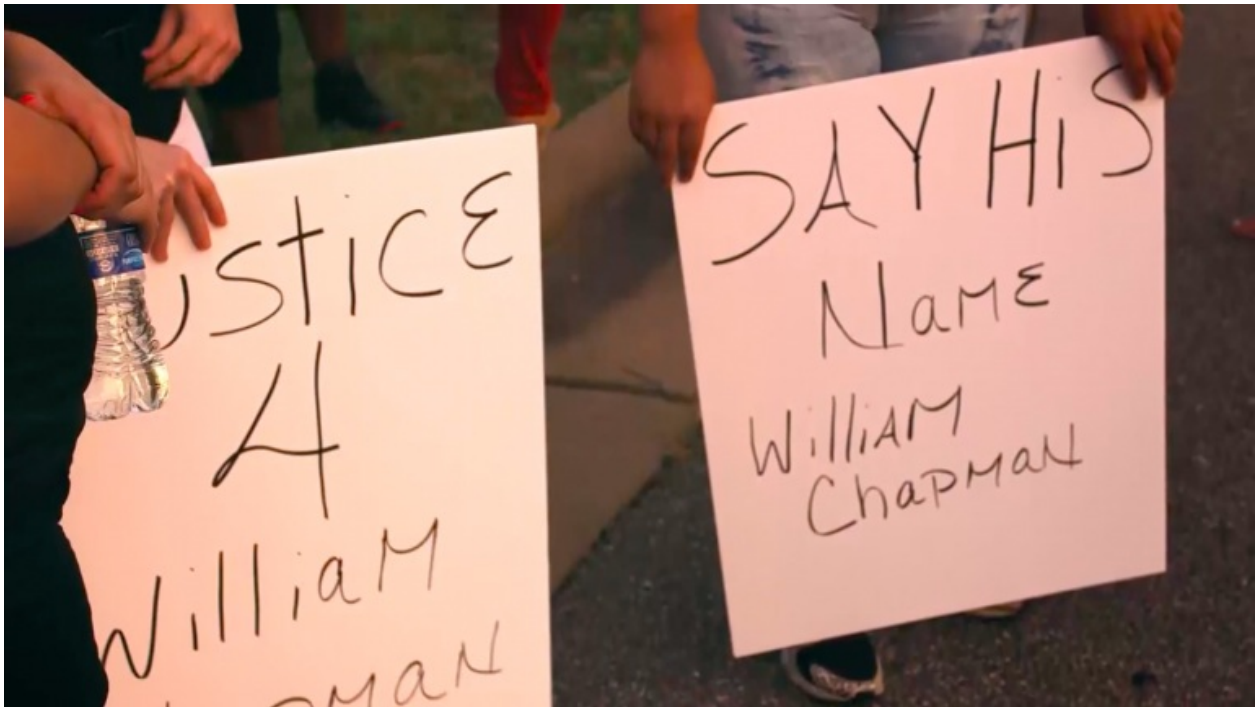
These numbers, though staggering, are no longer surprising. Awareness of the disproportionate killing of African Americans by law enforcement has grown in the US and internationally, ever since the fatal shooting in 2014 of 18-year-old Michael Brown by a white officer in Ferguson, Missouri that started the Black Lives Matter movement of protests and resistance. Stories of police acting too quickly with force flooded the media, with footage filmed on bystanders' smart phones often corroborating the claims that many victims had been unarmed.

This is the hostile and complex climate into which award-winning British documentary filmmaker James Jones waded when he began to investigate the death of (African American) William Chapman, who was 18 years old when he was shot by (white) police officer Steve Rankin in Portsmouth, Virginia, in April 2015. Over the course six months, Jones interviewed members of Chapman's family, Rankin's family and the community, documenting their lives in the lead up to Rankin's trial in August 2015.

Searing and Forensic

The result of Jones's research is a feature-length documentary, *Unarmed Black Male*, which premiered on BBC Two in November 2016. It is a searing and forensic look at one particular case, in an attempt to make sense of a vast phenomenon. Providing only a few facts and numbers, the documentary avoids a narrative, instead letting events and people speak for themselves.

“In a way, showing the human side of the problem [only] increases the sense of divide,” Jones said during his recent public lecture at LSE’s Polis think tank. Because communities in the South are still often segregated along racial lines, Jones and his producer spent weeks gaining the trust of Chapman’s mother and those around her – “as a white, middle-class British journalist, you immediately stand out” – but the family soon saw him as an ally in their fight for justice.



Unarmed Black Male’s main focus is the victim’s family, but the inclusion of Rankin’s own voice shows how complex the debate continues to be. Speaking on camera, Rankin insists that he was following protocol, adding that the standard reprimand for a police officer involved in a fatality is three weeks of administrative leave. “Sometimes you even get a medal,” he says with a smile.

“The story that he was clinging onto was that he was a good cop, when our documentary showed that he clearly wasn’t,” said Jones. Interviews with Rankin’s former boss and ex-wife present a man obsessed with the power of the firearm. Raw footage from the first time Rankin killed someone while on duty, when he shot an unarmed drunken loiterer eleven times for putting his hand near his waist, speaks for itself.

In all of the 1,146 cases, only 36 police officers were charged with a crime, and of these, only 6 were convicted. Officer Steve Rankin was one of them. In August 2015, he was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

Social Impact?

Asked whether he believes that documentaries can have an impact on the social issues they portray, Jones was hesitant to ascribe too much influence to his own work. “Because police shootings are such a thorny issue, it’s such a systemic protracted problem – there’s no clear solution.” Still, investigative documentaries have more budget and scope than local press, and so can reach a much larger audience. And soaring appetites for quality documentaries mean there is more funding available than ever before to tell stories like Champan’s.

Pressure from outside the US is beginning to have an influence, too: In August 2016, [The Guardian](#) reported that the US justice department would introduce a new federal system of recording police killings directly modelled on The Counted’s methodology. These may be small steps in addressing a systemic problem, but they do much to cement the role of deep, honest journalism in advancing social justice.

*James Jones's films are broadcast around the world, primarily on the [BBC](#), [Channel 4](#) and [PBS Frontline](#), and he has won an Emmy, a Grierson, a Rory Peck Award, and has been nominated four times at the BAFTAs. *Unarmed Black Male* will play at select festivals next spring. Follow him on Twitter: [@jamesjonestv](#)*

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