Chicago police have fatally shot 70 people over a five-year span, tops among departments in the largest U.S. cities.

The Chicago victims were nearly all male. Most were black. More than half of the killings occurred in six South Side police districts.

No other police department in any of the 10 most populous cities killed more people from 2010 to 2014, but Chicago ranks fourth behind Phoenix, Philadelphia and Dallas when the numbers are adjusted for population, according to a Better
Government Association analysis of data obtained through interviews and open records requests.

The findings come as law enforcement’s use of deadly force comes under intense scrutiny amid highly publicized killings in Cleveland, Ferguson, Mo., New York and elsewhere that have triggered a national conversation about policing.

In Chicago, an officer was recently acquitted of killing an unarmed woman, the first time a cop has stood trial for a fatal shooting in more than a decade, and the FBI is investigating last year’s death of a teen shot 16 times by Chicago police.

City officials are quick to point out, however, that police shootings are trending lower this year — officers had fatally shot three people in 2015 as of Friday, putting the department on pace to record the fewest killings since 2012 when there were a total of eight.

“The real question is, are the shootings appropriate?” says former Los Angeles police officer David Klinger, a professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. “If not, that’s where I get concerned.”

But how that determination is made can be controversial.

Chicago’s Independent Police Review Authority, or IPRA, has investigated nearly 400 police shootings (fatal and non-fatal) since 2007 and found only one to be unjustified, though Scott Ando, IPRA’s chief administrator, said there are pending investigations “that one would believe will be unjustified.” He declined to be more specific.

“Just because it was justified doesn’t mean it was necessary,” says Peter Moskos, a former Baltimore police officer who is an assistant professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at City University of New York. “Perhaps, it could have been prevented by better training or different tactics.”

Chicago Police Supt. Garry McCarthy has publicly credited more training and oversight, as well as officer restraint, for reducing the number of police shootings this year. His news affairs office didn’t respond to a request by the BGA to speak with McCarthy.
The City of Chicago has spent more than half a billion dollars for police misconduct-related claims over the past decade or so - and only a fraction of those payouts involve tortuous ex-police Cmdr. Jon Burge.

But in a written statement the department said, “Since 2011, under Superintendent McCarthy, the Chicago Police Department has invested in specialized instruction . . . [that] reinforces police officers’ skill sets on community building, problem solving and de-escalating tense confrontations. Police-involved shootings are down by double digit percentages following the implementation of this unique training.”

The Fraternal Order of Police, which represents rank-and-file Chicago cops, didn’t respond to interview requests.

The BGA obtained data on fatal shootings from departments in the 10 largest U.S. cities by population, through interviews and open records requests. The data includes shootings by on- and off-duty officers.

A federal database that tracks police shootings in a timely and comprehensive manner doesn’t exist, so there’s no simple way to compare the number of police shootings across different cities.

Chicago police reported killing 70 people from 2010 through 2014, the most of any department the BGA looked at, followed by Phoenix (57); Philadelphia (54); Houston (49); and Los Angeles (47), records show.

When adjusted for population, Phoenix was tops with a rate of 3.77 per 100,000 residents, followed by Philadelphia (3.48); Dallas (2.7); Chicago (2.57); and Houston (2.23). New York ranked at the bottom, though that department provided the BGA with data for only four of the five years requested. A police spokesman said 2014 figures weren’t available, though the New York Daily News reported last December that New York police had killed 13 people last year. A New York police spokesman could not confirm that figure.
Other notable findings include:

- Chicago police shot 240 people from 2010 through 2014, or an average about one per week, according to interviews and records. That was more than other departments examined by the BGA, though Los Angeles, New York and Phoenix provided incomplete data on overall police shootings, or data on fatal shootings only.

- Since 2010 the City of Chicago’s municipal government has paid $26.7 million to families of victims who were shot and killed by police, according to interviews and records. That includes a $5 million payment to the family of Laquan McDonald, the teen who was fatally shot 16 times by police last October. A FBI spokeswoman says a criminal investigation of that shooting is ongoing.

- Blacks comprise about a third of Chicago’s population but accounted for at least two-thirds, or 46, of the 70 people killed by police from 2010 to 2014, IPRA records show.

- Forty-one, or 59 percent of Chicago’s 70 fatal shootings, occurred in the Calumet, Deering, Englewood, Grand Crossing, Gresham and Morgan Park police districts.

Told of the BGA’s findings, Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago, said he wasn’t surprised the shootings were concentrated in specific pockets of the city.

“The districts where police shootings are the highest are probably the districts where violent and gang crimes are the highest,” he says. “In those neighborhoods police are on higher alert. They’re more likely to feel threatened and there’s a greater likelihood they’ll react more aggressively.”

Last year the BGA reported that, over a decade, the city spent more than $500 million on police misconduct-related legal claims, including those involving police shootings.