

Violence declines across United States, but not against police

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When Lower Burrell Patrolman Derek Kotecki was slain just after 7 p.m. on Oct. 12, he became the 53rd officer killed in the line of duty across the United States this year.

Somehow, even as the nation's crime rate is going down, a law enforcement officer is dying, on average, every 53 hours.

In addition to Kotecki and the 52 other officers shot to death, 96 other officers have died on the job from other causes, including stabbing, vehicle accidents, heart attack and more. That brings the total of dead officers, as of Saturday, to 149 nationwide.

In the latest edition of Crime in the United States, the FBI said the estimated number of violent crimes in 2010 declined for the fourth consecutive year.

According to the Pennsylvania State Police Uniform Crime Report, violent crimes decreased in the state in 2010, from 48,040 in 2009 to 46,310. There were about the same number of slayings in 2010 as in the previous year, 651 to 657, and the rate of assault on officers decreased in state by almost 12 percent in 2010 compared to the previous year.

Yet crimes against law enforcement are increasing nationwide, according to a Steve Groeninger, spokesman for the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund.

According to the NLEF, there were 572 officer shooting deaths nationwide between 2001 through 2010.

The organization also says that 21 of the 53 gunshot deaths this year happened when officers were attempting to make arrests or conducting surveillance, searches or suspect interviews. That was the case with Kotecki's death. A suspect in a shooting 10 days before ambushed the officer Oct. 12 in a restaurant parking lot as he and others went there to arrest him.

Last year, shootings claimed 59 officers nationwide — 10 more than in 2009 and 19 more than in 2008. In 2007, 69 officers were shot and killed, an extremely deadly year for police. The NLEF is worried that number will be reached again this year.

During the past 10 years, an average of 55 officers has died from gunshots while on duty.

"But 20 years ago, most officers were dying in traffic accidents," Groeninger said. "Now, there appears to be much more anti-authority sentiment."

Violence against police: Why?

The U.S. Department of Justice and the International Association of Chiefs of Police have formed the National Center for Violence Against The Police.

"We don't know why this is happening," said Deborah Meader, a policy adviser for the department's Bureau of Justice Assistance. "That's why we are looking into it ... to prevent further assaults and deaths."

Police chiefs association spokesman John Firman said the 2009 killings of four officers in Lakewood, Wash., by a felon who was on pretrial release led to the formation of the national center.

"We are digging deeper into the data accumulated by the FBI," Firman said. "What are the variables that we can control?"

During the last 20 years, there haven't been many blips in the numbers "but during the past 24 months, we've had more shootings of officers and more multiple shootings," Firman said. "That's troubling."

The International Association of Chiefs of Police held a conference on Saturday in Chicago. The center distributed a brochure telling police chiefs about how they can better protect their officers.

"We don't want officers to feel like they're under attack," said Firman, whose son is a police officer. "But we want them prepared and alert."

In addition to helping to form the center, the Justice Department also distributed thousands of safety electronic and printed "tool kits" to remind officers of safety and how to deal with conflict.

One tool is called VALOR, short for the Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability program. It "helps officers respond to the precipitous increase in ambush-style assaults" through training and technical assistance, Meader said.

"Officer safety is our number one concern," added James Pasco, president of the National Fraternal Order of Police.

He said three factors are involved in the crime rate in a particular area:

- The level of effectiveness of the officer on the street.
- The economic situation in the area.
- The demographics.

"We're seeing more people 18 to 25 and a bit older more inclined to commit crime," Pasco said, "and when they do, they are far more likely to commit a violent crime."

All Pennsylvania municipal police officers must be certified and then annually attend updates held by the Municipal Officers' Education & Training Commission.

The commission's Bev Young said the trainers will evaluate the Kotecki murder and see if there is anything that officers can learn from what happened.

The annual updates always include the latest safety tips, said Young, a retired Temple University police officer.

According to the state's Uniform Crime Report that the Pennsylvania State Police compiles, from 2006 to 2010, 17 law enforcement officers in the state died on the job. Some were shot. Others were hit by cars.

Sgt. Anthony Manetta said people should be careful about comparing the numbers.

"It's difficult to correlate the crime numbers with officer death numbers. It's really like comparing apples to oranges," Manetta said.

"People have so many reasons to harm each other, versus the far fewer reasons they may have to harm police officers," Manetta said.

"Harming a police officer calls for a level of emotion and motivation that is higher," he said. "It often involves a weapon because the officer is armed. They know they have to overcome a much greater force."

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