Are Police Choosing to De-Police and Is Society at War with Law Enforcement?

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Introduction

Over the past several years, police officers' actions have been under scrutiny after several highly publicized incidents involving the killing of Black men. One such killing was that of an unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's death ignited protests in multiple states and a firestorm of calls for police reform beginning in 2014 (Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2017). The resulting scrutiny sparked debate over the supposed "Ferguson effect" and moreover, the phenomenon of de-policing (MacDonald, 2019).

De-Policing

❖ De-policing involves police officers avoiding being actively involved in law enforcement duties including making fewer arrests, having fewer encounters with the public, and making fewer traffic stops (Deuchar, Fallik, & Crichton, 2018).

❖ De-policing is also described as police officers avoiding duty related confrontations or conflicts that may require them to use force as a form of self-preservation against negative perceptions from the public (Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017).
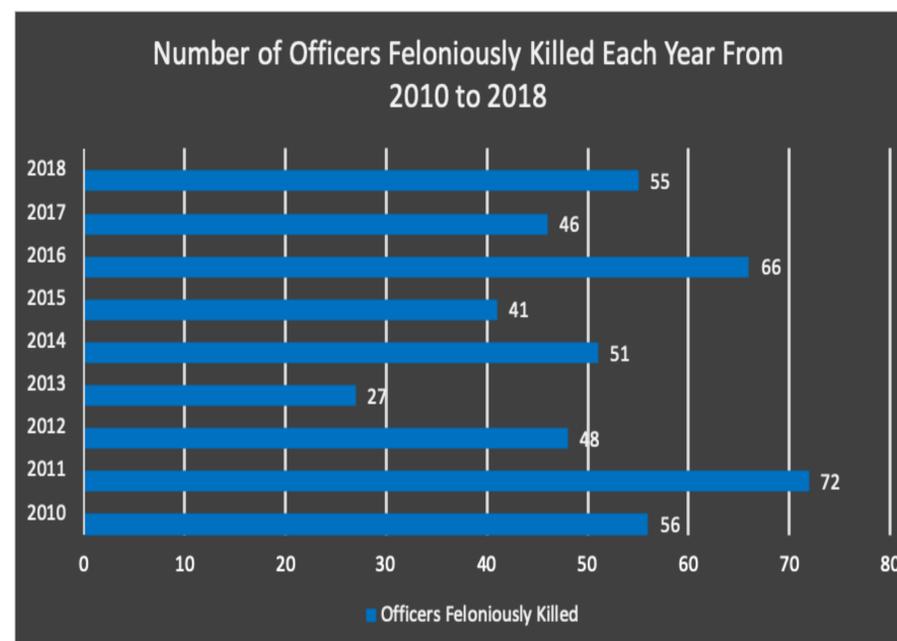
Research Findings Supporting De-Policing

❖ Proponents claim police officers are experiencing negative psychological effects brought about by unprecedented scrutiny relating to the use of deadly force (Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017).

❖ Some evidence of this de-policing is supported by research findings indicating police officers perceive there is a "war on cops" (Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2017).

❖ Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, and Decker (2017) found that de-policing is occurring more frequently in areas with more minority residents.

❖ Oliver (2017) found that officers admit de-policing is occurring and cite consequential fears related to factors such as civil liability, termination, stricter laws and policies, the possibility of riots, being labeled, as well as being killed on the job for simply attempting to carry out their duties.

Alternate Findings

❖ Maguire, Nix, and Campbell (2017) looked specifically at the murder of police officers in the line of duty within this "war on cops" context and found no increases in the murder rates of police officers after the death of Michael Brown.

❖ However, given the completion of Maguire, Nix, and Campbell's article in September of 2016, the data from 2016, 2017, and 2018 were not considered, nor were the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, two Black males killed by police in July of 2016.

Number of Officers Feloniously Killed Each Year From 2010 to 2018

Year	Officers Feloniously Killed
2018	55
2017	46
2016	66
2015	41
2014	51
2013	27
2012	48
2011	72
2010	56

Circumstances Surrounding Officer Killings

❖ According to a 2019 FBI report, 66 police officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty in 2016, which is the highest rate of officer death in any year since 2007 with the exception of 2011.

❖ Additionally, the 66 felonious killings of police officers in 2016 was nearly a 38% rise from 2015 when 41 officers were murdered.

❖ Most notably, 17 of the 66 police officer murders in 2016 occurred as a result of ambush. This indicates a nearly 200% increase of this type of attack over the past decade (FBI, 2019).

❖ In 8 of the 17 incidents or nearly one half of the ambush killings of police officers in 2016, the known motives of the gunmen are attributed to retribution for the perceived unjustified killing of Black men such as Brown, Sterling, and Castile by police (Protect and Serve Act, 2018).

Implications

❖ Increased hostility toward police and the occurrence of de-policing have a multitude of implications for police officers, law enforcement organizations, and the public.

❖ For example, scholars suggest:
  • Police officers are likely to become less social, more cynical, and apprehensive (Torres, Reling, & Hawdon, 2018),
  • Increased risk for criminal activity and a delegitimization of law enforcement (Nix & Wolfe, 2016).

❖ On the other hand, some opine that de-policing may not be a negative occurrence and cite:
  • The possibility that a retreat from more aggressive policing may increase community trust, especially in minority communities (Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017).

❖ However, the dearth of research findings related to the effects of increased scrutiny, de-policing, and particularly post-Ferguson police officer attitudes makes gauging these phenomena illusory.

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