



## After a Dangerous Year, Officers' Family and Colleagues Reflect

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When a gunman charged and shot Philadelphia police officer Jesse Hartnett in his squad car earlier this month, the harrowing confrontation was disturbingly familiar.

Six police officers were killed by ambush shootings last year, while 15 ambushes took the lives of officers in 2014. The targeted killings present a risk to officers beyond more conventional threats, such as policing rough neighborhoods, adding another layer to the intense challenges police face.

Hartnett survived the onslaught and managed to return fire, helping officers apprehend the shooter. Yet many of these attacks don't end that way. According to annual data, the six deadly ambushes last year account for 14 percent of officers killed in shootings in 2015. A total of 39 officers were intentionally killed by gunfire in 2015, according to the National Law Enforcement Memorials Fund — and just before midnight Sunday, an Ohio police officer was found dead with his gun and cruiser missing.

New interviews with relatives and colleagues of fallen officers shed light on the state of policing today.

### *Public servants*

"When I heard, I didn't believe it — I never would have never thought that would happen," said Michael Clements, recalling his step-father's James Bennett's death in the line of duty.

Bennett, 45, was murdered in an ambush shooting last May. He was sitting in his squad car at a New Orleans construction site.

Clements remembers him as a "big teddy bear" who believed in public service.

"A lot of people take officers for granted," he told NBC News, "everyone is so against the police."

A friend of Clements, Bum Lee, said he worries young people don't "want to get into law enforcement because of all the stories about bad cops." Yet Clements was the ultimate good cop, he said, a community leader both on and off duty.

"He had a mobile weight room," Lee told NBC News, "and would take it to kids in low-income housing to teach them about working out and being fit."

Another officer killed in an ambush shooting last year, Ricardo Galvez, devoted his life to different kinds of public service.

Galvez served two tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as a U.S. Marine. When he returned home, he worked as a police aide for four years in Downey, California, and then became a police officer in 2010. "Growing up, Ricky wanted to be a police officer," recalled his sister, Sandra Galvez.

Authorities charged three assailants for ambushing and murdering Galvez in his car, which was parked at the police department.

After Galvez was murdered, his sister Sandra learned even more details about his approach to policing.

"There are so many things we found out after he died. There was a lady he pulled over for expired registration, and she told him she can't afford to pay it right now, because her husband had recently passed away and the bills were piling up," she told NBC News.

"He let her off with a warning," she recalled, "and the next day, he went in to a Triple-A office and paid \$165 for her registration."

That story of spontaneous generosity, Galvez said, made her remember one of her brother's sayings. "He always said you should help others if they needed," she recalled, "especially when you have been blessed."

### ***Killed before maternity leave***

Hector Orozco, a widower of another officer killed in 2015, says his wife joined the force because she liked "helping people."

Orozco's wife, Kerrie, an Omaha police officer, was shot to death one day before her maternity leave was set to begin in May, while attempting to serve a warrant on a shooting suspect. She went back on duty, colleagues explained, so she could save all her time off for when her baby, born prematurely, would be released from the hospital.

Her husband said that while her job was clearly dangerous, that wasn't something they focused on.

"We talked about work, but never had a serious conversation about what could happen," he recalled. "You never think that something like that will happen to you."

Jessica Swanson, an officer who attended police academy with Orozco and served with her, said she was the kind of officer who could melt antipathy against the police.

"Even if there was a young kid who had negative experience with the police, they would still want to talk to her," Swanson told NBC. "She was everyone's 'Coach K.' — that's what her little leaguers called her."

Another officer remembered for his compassion is Sonny Kim, a 48-year-old Cincinnati officer killed while responding to a 9-1-1 call in June.

A 27-year veteran on the force, Kim taught karate when he wasn't on duty.

"We opened a karate school," recalls his wife, Jessica Kim. "People would always think he was so serious, but actually he's pretty goofy and funny."

According to Cincinnati police, Kim was shot by an assailant who called 9-1-1 in order to provoke a confrontation — an attempt at "suicide by cop."

Kim's wife says there was an outpouring from their community after the murder.

"After he passed, I got a lot of phone calls. People would call to tell me how much they loved him," she told NBC News. "He made a connection with people — the area he patrolled, people knew him."

She also shared a memory from her youngest son, 12-year-old Jacob Kim.

"My dad was a very kind and loving dad," he said. "We had some great times together, although his time with us may have been cut short, I know that one day I will be reunited with him."

### ***Good guys and bad guys***

Some family members of fallen officers say this is an especially hard period to mourn an officer, because so much public attention has focused on allegations of police misconduct, after reports of police brutality in Chicago, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Ferguson, Missouri.

"People now have a tendency to be upset over bad officers — and not focus on all the others who face risks and threats on a daily basis," said Lonnie Ross, whose stepson, Liquori Tate, was killed during a traffic stop in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Tate, 25, had been on the job for under a year.

"In the back of our minds, we knew he faced danger and every phone call we got would make us nervous," Ross recalled, "but nothing prepared us for that call on May 9."

Ross believes it's important to balance the scrutiny on police misconduct with an understanding that most officers are honest, ethical and brave.

"I'm an African-American male and I've been mistreated by officers, but I've also been treated well by several officers — I've seen both sides of the coin," he told NBC News.

"Since Liquori, I pay attention to every story about officers. I feel for every officer — doesn't matter what race or culture," he said. "Liquori made me have empathy for risks they take, and we honor them everywhere we go. Every time we meet an officer, we greet them and thank them."

"Bad officers need to be dealt with when they do wrong — but those are separate from the good officers," Ross added. "Those bad ones are making it hard for all officers because they are all getting a bad rep."

Some national data reinforces that view.

While police shootings and allegations of misconduct draw warranted scrutiny, government and independent statistics suggest those incidents do not comprise the daily work of most officers.

There is no way to compare uniform data on policing, because the federal government does not track several types of policing incidents. (The current Attorney General and FBI Director have called for reforming data collection.) Comparing policing data from a range of recent sources, however, presents part of the picture.

Last year, estimates of fatal police shootings of civilians ranged from 965 to 1,136, including the killing of about 90 unarmed people, according to *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*.

Beyond those fatal incidents, which generate the most attention and litigation, reports of police misconduct in a given year can run up to about 5,000. That is a category the government does not track, but a police oversight project by the Cato Institute, a libertarian organization, tracks "credible reports" that appear in the press of allegations of police misconduct.

In its last annual report, in 2010, it documented 4,861 unique allegations of misconduct against 6,613 officers, including 1,575 allegations of excessive force.

The estimates for those incidents can be contextualized within the scale of policing across the country: About 698,000 law enforcement officers have contact with about 62 million people annually, according to the Justice Department. (The data on police contacts is from 2011, the most recent year available; though a department statistician, Lynn Langton, tells NBC News the fluctuation in data between reported years is "slight.")

One way to parse that national data: In a given year, roughly 99.1% of officers are not accused of any misconduct, let alone convicted of it.

The Cato Institute also notes that annual data is one way to assess the issue, while over the average 25-year career span of an officer, their data indicates "roughly one out of every 4.7 police officers will be involved in an alleged act of police misconduct."

***Police in the spotlight***

Law enforcement experts say the current focus on policing is unusual, and could be a good thing.

"Never before have we seen such a sustained public interest in policing policy," says Seth Stoughton, a criminal law professor and former Tallahassee police officer. "I am cautiously optimistic that we are seeing ground work for the next evolution of police culture."

Stoughton, who studies police oversight, says data on police deaths shows the risk facing officers is declining — although that's no solace to victims' families.

"The numbers tells us that policing is increasingly safer," he said, "part of an overall downward trend" in killings.

"There are 57,000 felonious assaults per year — and an average of less than 50 officers feloniously killed," he said, "this is 50 out of thousands."

The 39 officers killed by intentional gunfire last year is less than the annual average in each of the past five decades. (Those figures ranged from 57 annual police killings in the 2000s, to 127 in the 1970s.) "We focus on severity of risk and exaggerate probability of risk," Stoughton told NBC, "that leaves officers in a position of poor risk assessments." He also stressed "that doesn't make the family of the officer feel better."

Reforming police culture, Stoughton said, begins with better training on firearms restraint and de-escalation techniques.

Daniel Isom, the former St. Louis police commissioner, says training should be upgraded to tackle the "stress of managing conflict without force," which he calls a special skill. Officers must also be trained to not only restrain subjects as potential threats, he said, but to "be sensitive to all types of people and manage fear."

As for criticism of police, Stoughton argues there is justifiable concern about misconduct — but also rash judgments about police actions.

"We take officers for granted to the extent that we have a strong tendency to simplify the job of police," he told NBC News. "We expect them to distinguish the good guy from the bad guy right away," he says, which can be unfeasible in a split second.

Dennis Koch, the former president of a police union in Texas, the state which lost the most officers to shootings last year, echoed that point.

"A disturbance can escalate really quickly because of the actions people take when an officer is present," he told NBC News. "The average person doesn't understand what an officer sees — officers have to react very quickly."

Craig Floyd, the CEO of the National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund, which compiles the annual data on police shootings, said this is a time to "restore broken trust" between officers and the public.

"Body cameras are one way to do this," he told NBC News, because video footage demonstrates that in "the vast majority of cases, police conduct themselves professionally and properly."

Other law enforcement experts argued that the entire notion of public dissatisfaction with police is overstated.

"From what I've seen in Louisiana, there's a lot of support for law enforcement. Many civic groups, churches, and other organizations have organized rallies in support of law enforcement," says Officer Darrell Basco, president of the Louisiana police union.

He estimated that citizens spontaneously organized 15 rallies in support of police over the past year. "Community support means more to the profession than people realize," he said, "it means a lot to us."

Nationally, public opinion towards police is generally positive, but it has dipped in the past few years.

About 52% of Americans say they have confidence in the police, according to Gallup, down from an average in the high 50s over the past two decades.

Eugene O'Donnell, a former NYPD officer who teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said he's found esteem for the police remains pretty high.

"There is still deep support for police — they are still very respected," he said. Yet some of the framing in public debates, he argues, implicitly compromises the role of law enforcement.

"People say 'they are like everybody else.' No, they are not like everybody else," he told NBC News. "They get paid to look for trouble; their role is adversarial. We need to treat them as surrogates who take care of trouble," he argued. "They act on our behalf, they put themselves in danger."

With that framework in mind, O'Donnell said, it's also vital for police and the public to face the fact that some officers have been proven to be "abusive and racist," and to ensure accountability in those cases.

In interviews about their fallen colleagues, officers returned to the idea that most officers are motivated by serving the public.

"As officers, we go into this line of work to help people," said Jessica Swanson, who handles public affairs for the Omaha police department. "We come into it because you go home at night knowing specific instances of how you helped someone; it's a great feeling — kind of like instant gratification."

"Even with everything you hear," she added, "You do it because somebody's got to do it. Someone's got to protect families out there."