

Marin Voice: Police bear increasingly heavy burden of society's problems

*By: Adam McGill
December 30, 2018*

On Dec. 26 in Newman, California, police Cpl. Ronil Singh, 33, was shot and killed after making a traffic stop. From 1992 until Jan. 9, 2005, when Ceres police Sgt. Howard Stevenson was gunned down, I had never personally known a single officer killed in the line of duty. Officers were killed during this period, but not in my circle.

Now, in just the past 13 years, the number of officers I've known killed on duty has grown to 11.

The number of U.S. police officers killed in the line of duty is on the rise. So far this year, officer deaths have already increased 12 percent over 2017 numbers, and it's not just officers being murdered. Peace officers are taking their own lives at an alarming rate, more often than being killed by other means.

Oddly, this escalation of peace officer deaths is occurring as crime is trending downward, but calls to police are trending upward.

What's changed in policing that may be contributing to more officers being killed?

The role of peace officers has shifted dramatically in the last decade. It's never been more complex, challenging or dangerous for peace officers. All of society's most difficult problems have become daily concerns for the police. Homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness have become the primary daily activities of peace officers.

Far too often the police are the wrong intervention for these societal issues, resulting in unintended outcomes, both for the officer and the person in crisis.

The three largest psychiatric centers in the United States are jails: Rikers Island, Cook County and Los Angeles County. In 1960, the U.S. population was about 160 million with 600,000 inpatient mental health beds. Today, the population is about 330 million with only 60,000 inpatient beds nationwide, with 6,700 beds in California. Peace officers are left to serve this population on our streets every day, with too few tools to help.

California's criminal justice system has experienced aggressive reform, resulting in tens of thousands of prisoners being released from state prison to be supervised by local peace officers and probation officers. The verdict is still out on whether these reforms have made us safer or if recidivism rates have improved.

There are more demands than ever before on police resources, staff, budgets and training without a commensurate increase in staffing or training budgets. In Novato,

we've enhanced our training to learn how to serve the mentally ill more effectively and attempt to safely manage those in crisis.

We're now carrying lifesaving drugs to medically revive individuals dying from opioid overdoses. Sacramento continues to compel this new normal, while at the same time decreasing statewide peace officer training funds and offering no funding for more personnel.

Considering the evolving role of officers, the divisive views of society and the media, along with the physical and legal risks, finding and retaining qualified people who want to serve as officers is a daunting task.

In Novato, we're grateful to have a supportive City Council and community that is committed to investing in officer wellness, protective equipment and training. These efforts make the police and community safer.

So, what's changed in policing in the last 10 years? Nearly everything. Much of the change has been good for the profession, but it comes at the highest cost. There is only so much we can expect of our peace officers. Collectively, all of society must do more to lessen the burdens on a single profession.

Officer Singh's murder is just the latest example of the high cost being paid by peace officers, and he won't be the last.

Adam McGill has served as Novato's chief of police since January 2017 and has more than 25 years of experience with police departments in Northern and Central California.