

Despite more violent crimes, it's safer to be a cop today than 50 years ago

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The study represents one of the most comprehensive assessments of the 'dangerousness' of policing to date, and paints a clear picture of the declines in dangerousness over time, as well as the extraordinary stability in key features of officer line-of-duty deaths during the last 50 years or so. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

There is no doubt that policing is a dangerous profession. But is it safer to be a cop today than it was 50 years ago? Yes, according to a study that analyzed police officer deaths (felonious and non-felonious) in the United States from 1970 to 2016. The study represents one of the most comprehensive assessments of the "dangerousness" of policing to date and provides an important historical context on the ongoing dialogue over a perceived "war on cops" in recent years.

Researchers from Florida Atlantic University, Arizona State University, and the University of Texas at El Paso, found that despite increases in [violent crimes](#), the hazards of policing has dramatically declined since 1970 with a 75 percent drop in police officer line-of-duty deaths. The study also refutes the theory of "war on cops," following the Ferguson effect and Michael Brown's death in August 2014, and finds no evidence to support those claims.

"On average, there were slightly more than 1.6 fewer felonious police officer deaths per month after Michael Brown's death in August 2014 when compared with pre-August 2014," said Lisa Dario, Ph.D., co-author and an assistant professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice in FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry. "This result directly contradicts the hypothesized war on cops, in which an increase in felonious killings after August 2014 is predicted. Our results show the opposite. In the context of nearly 50-year monthly trends, our results show a statistically significant decline in felonious killings of police after Michael Brown's death."

Results of the study, published in the *Journal of Criminology & Public Policy*, show that felonious deaths dropped by more than 80 percent. The only anomaly is 2001 when more than 70 officers were killed during the 9/11 [terrorist attack](#). The rate of non-felonious deaths also declined by 69 percent. Furthermore, the gap between felonious and non-felonious deaths closed over time. Officer deaths peaked in 1974 at 272; in 2016

there were 134 deaths.

One factor that did not play a clear role is violent crime at the national level, which increased steadily and significantly from 1970 through the mid-1990s. At the same time, however, the number of officer deaths declined significantly.

"To put this in simple terms, if violent crime is a proxy measure of the dangerousness of the environment in which police work, it does not seem to correlate well with actual dangerousness of the profession measured as officer deaths at the national level," said Dario.

The researchers attribute the declines in officer deaths, at least in part, by the increased use of body armor and advances in trauma care that also have undoubtedly saved officers' lives. Moreover, enhanced training, better policy, better supervision, and technological advances have likely played a role in the declines described in this study.

For nearly 50 years, deaths varied little in terms of geography (state), time (month), and for the most part, cause of death. Most officer characteristics also remained consistent, such as sex, rank, marital and family status, duty status, and type of agency.

The researchers also found notable changes in cause of death. For felonious deaths, gunfire was the most common cause (about three quarters overall), but deaths resulting from gunfire declined over time. This is explained in part by the 9/11 terrorist attacks—both deaths occurring that day as well as those occurring later as a result of 9/11-related illness.

Deaths resulting from vehicular assaults such as officers being struck by drunk drivers also doubled during the study period. Interestingly, deaths occurring during automobile pursuits remained stable over time (5 to 6

percent) despite policy changes adopted by departments to restrict and control pursuits.

For the study, the researchers used data from the Officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP), which captures all officer line-of-duty deaths, except for suicides, which was not part of this study. Cause of death was felonious attacks, accidents, and other non-felonious circumstances resulting from the nature of the job like a heart attack or work-related illness.

Although 2017 deaths were not included in this study, ODMP has reported that line-of-duty deaths in 2017 were at the lowest level since 1958, which directly contradicts the war on cops' theory.

"In every given year, about 10 percent of police officers are assaulted. Regardless of how the [death](#) occurs, the consequences of officer line-of-duty deaths are tragic and multi-faceted, affecting officers' families, coworkers, the agency, the community and the entire profession," said Dario. "Through our study findings, we can paint a clear picture of the declines in dangerousness over time, as well as the extraordinary stability in key features of officer line-of-duty deaths during the last 50 years or so."

Officer deaths overall were most common in California (8 to 11 percent), Texas (8 to 11 percent), Florida (4 to 7 percent), and New York (4 to 15 percent), which is proportionate to the number of officers employed in those states.

More information: Michael D. White et al, Assessing dangerousness in policing, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12408](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12408)

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