

# OpTac International News Bulletin

## Line of Duty Deaths

February 2016, was the deadliest February for U.S. law enforcement in the past 20 years. This edition of the **OpTac International News Bulletin** presents data on January and February line of duty deaths resulting from gunfire over the past two decades, along with corresponding analysis.



The following table shows line of duty gunfire deaths for the years 1997-2016:

|      | January        | February      | Total |
|------|----------------|---------------|-------|
| 2016 | 2 plus 4 K-9s  | 9 plus 0 K-9s | 15    |
| 2015 | 0 plus 2 K-9s  | 0 plus 0 K-9s | 2     |
| 2014 | 2 plus 1 K-9   | 1 plus 0 K-9s | 4     |
| 2013 | 2 plus 1 K-9   | 8 plus 0 K-9s | 11    |
| 2012 | 8 plus 0 K-9s  | 2 plus 0 K-9s | 10    |
| 2011 | 10 plus 0 K-9s | 5 plus 0 K-9s | 15    |
| 2010 | 7 plus 1 K-9   | 4 plus 0 K-9s | 12    |
| 2009 | 1 plus 0 K-9s  | 1 plus 0 K-9s | 2     |
| 2008 | 5 plus 0 K-9s  | 4 plus 0 K-9s | 9     |
| 2007 | 7 plus 0 K-9s  | 6 plus 0 K-9s | 13    |
| 2006 | 2 plus 0 K-9s  | 7 plus 0 K-9s | 9     |
| 2005 | 4 plus 0 K-9s  | 4 plus 0 K-9s | 8     |
| 2004 | 4 plus 0 K-9s  | 7 plus 0 K-9s | 11    |
| 2003 | 2 plus 1 K-9   | 3 plus 0 K-9s | 6     |
| 2002 | 8 plus 0 K-9s  | 2 plus 0 K-9s | 10    |
| 2001 | 3 plus 0 K-9s  | 7 plus 0 K-9s | 10    |
| 2000 | 3 plus 0 K-9s  | 4 plus 1 K-9  | 8     |
| 1999 | 4 plus 1 K-9   | 3 plus 0 K-9s | 8     |
| 1998 | 10 plus 0 K-9s | 3 plus 0 K-9s | 13    |
| 1997 | 5 plus 1 K-9   | 8 plus 0 K-9s | 14    |

Data Source: *Officer Down Memorial Page*

Nine officers were killed in February 2016, which is not only more than any year in the table, but also, a dramatic increase from last year (0 deaths) and 2014 (one death). Additionally, this data only reflects line of duty deaths, and not officers who survived their gunshot wounds. **News Bulletin** format does not allow for the detailed analysis this subject requires; however, it is the starting point for a necessary dialogue among officers and their agencies.

There are three main factors directly relating to line of duty gunfire deaths: organizational, individual, and offender. Organizational factors include inadequate officer selection processes and officer preparation, along with an insufficient number of officers responding to calls for service. Money for additional officers and their subsequent training drives the organizational issue for most departments. This, combined with a reluctance to innovate officer preparation in both initial academies and in-service training, does not

adequately prepare officers for their multiple roles in society.

Police officers are asked to be psychologists/mental health experts, social workers, marriage counselors, mediators, teachers, friends, lawyers, firearms experts, tacticians, and defensive tactics/protection specialists. Job performance is scrutinized when results do not meet community expectations; however, police support is rarely provided with the same vigor as the criticism received. Few other professions, outside of the military, offer the possibility of death during the "routine" performance of daily duties. As such, officer performance must be almost flawless.

Individual factors affecting line of duty deaths include poor situational assessments and ineffective decision-making skills. While this also relates to selection and training, officers must still make split second decisions that carry life and death consequences. Of great importance is the recognition that some people are just not suited for the job of a law enforcement officer. Officers must conduct a realistic self-assessment even after they are certified to carry a gun and wear a badge. Another individual factor currently influencing decision-making is an officer's keen awareness of the potential for criminal indictments and civil lawsuits, which in many cases creates a reluctance to employ deadly force. This reluctance can be beneficial when deadly force is unwarranted, as no one should *want* to shoot another person, but hesitation can also be deadly for officers when such use of force is necessary in dealing with armed offenders.

Last and perhaps most important, are offender factors; principally, the deadly consequences of untreated mental illness that is present throughout society. Violent mentally ill individuals are dramatically increasing the number of line of duty gunfire deaths. Case in point: Last month, an Army Staff Sergeant shot three Prince William County, Virginia Police Officers, killing one of them. The Staff Sergeant had killed his wife prior to the officers' arrival during a domestic dispute. Earlier in the month, two Harford County, Maryland Sheriff's Deputies were shot and killed at a Panera restaurant by a homeless man. The man's ex-wife contacted the Sheriff's Office to report that he had shot her 17 years ago and that he was eating inside Panera. The shooters in these and many other deadly encounters suffered from untreated mental illness.

Line of duty gunfire deaths will continue at an alarming rate until adequate low-cost treatment facilities are made readily available for the mentally ill, and law enforcement agencies make effective first responder education and response, particularly in the area of mental illness, a priority.