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Police shootings on the rise in NH

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Salem, N.H., police at the scene of a Jan. 6 shooting in front of 155 South Policy St. This was the first of six incidents this year in which a N.H. police officer shot and either injured or killed a suspect. Staff file photo

Eagle-Tribune
Staff Photographer



When Larry Minassian was shot and injured during a confrontation with Salem, N.H., police in January, it marked the beginning of a disturbing chain of events in New Hampshire.

Six months later, Granite State police officers have shot more people in a single year than at any time in recent memory, New Hampshire Senior Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey Strelzin said.

Six people have been shot in standoffs with police this year, while most years there are only one or two, he said.

And it's only July.

"I don't know if it's a trend or not," Strelzin said. "It's certainly high."

The slumping economy, rising crime and drug use are a few of the reasons, police said.

While there have been no "police-involved shootings" in the Merrimack Valley this year, local law enforcement officials there say their departments have just been lucky. A dangerous confrontation between the public and police can happen in any community at any time, they said.

Strelzin said solid conclusions on why there is an increase in Granite State cases can't be based on a single year.

Police officials in both New Hampshire and Massachusetts said there are many reasons why encounters between individuals and officers can lead to a suspect being shot.

A general loss of respect for law enforcement and human life, the economic downturn, and increases in crime and drug use are some of the factors they attribute to why the safety of police officers and the public is perhaps more at risk than ever before.

"It's difficult to put a finger on why it's happening," Salem Deputy police Chief Shawn Patten said. "Any time a police officer has to use deadly force, it's traumatic, not only for the victim, but the officers as well."

Patten said he couldn't comment on the shooting of Minassian on Jan. 6 because the case is still pending.

Minassian, who confronted officers with a foot-long sword, recovered from his injuries and was recently indicted. It was the third shooting involving Salem police since October 2004, when an officer fired a shot at Brian Farnell of Salem.

Farnell struck two officers while fleeing in his car. The bullet missed Farnell. Three months later, Kip Pepin, who was armed with a loaded 12-gauge shotgun, was shot multiple times and killed in an encounter with Salem police.

Crime, poor economy blamed for increase

Patten said a general rise in crime in Salem and other communities in recent years, coupled with people struggling financially, can lead to more dangerous situations between the public and police.

"It's well documented in Salem, our crime rates and activity rates have risen dramatically," he said. "I believe (the economy) is another huge factor."

So does Deputy police Chief Kathleen Jones of Plaistow, where there also was a police-involved shooting this winter.

"We have seen an overall increase in violent crime, partly due to the economy and partly due to the prevalence of the drug trade," Jones said.

The shooting in Plaistow occurred March 10 when Angel Bermudez-Rosario, 28, of Dorchester was injured by a shot fired by a sheriff's deputy. The bullet shattered the window of Bermudez-Rosario's car as he fled from authorities. Broken glass struck Bermudez-Rosario in the eye, according to his attorney, Murat Erkan.

Bermudez-Rosario, indicted last month on more than a dozen drug charges, is accused of trying to run down two sheriff's deputies after they tried to arrest him on Newton Road in Plaistow.

The Salem and Plaistow incidents are the only shootings involving police in the state this year that didn't result in a fatality. Three men and a woman were shot and killed during confrontations in Concord, Manchester, Hillsborough and Winchester, Strelzin said.

The attorney general's office ruled all six shootings were justifiable. The Winchester shooting June 27 was determined to be justified in a report issued Friday.

Although there have been no shootings involving officers in the Merrimack Valley this year, local police said it could easily happen. But proper training of officers helps to defuse most incidents before they become deadly, they said.

"There have been situations that have come close to that in the last few years," North Andover police Chief Paul Gallagher said.

Some departments credit luck

Haverhill Deputy Chief Donald Thompson said his department has been lucky. As of June 30, there had been 15 cases where an officer has had to draw a gun. That compares to 12 incidents for the same period last year.

"I have noticed there have been more situations where officers have had to draw their weapons," he said.

No statistics on police-involved shootings in Massachusetts this year were available. Wayne Sampson, executive director of the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association, said there are usually no more than a dozen a year.

Steve O'Connell, spokesman for the Essex County district attorney's office, said there have been a few cases in the Lynn area, but none in the Merrimack Valley.

Sampson and Jeffrey Stiegler, president of the New Hampshire Police Association, said turbulent times and surging crime rates have had a lot to do with increases in police-involved shootings in New Hampshire and across the country.

"The national statistics right now show an increase in violent crime," Sampson said. "You're looking at one of the worst economic times people have seen in their lives."

There are also more incidents of "suicide by cop," he said, situations in which officers are often compelled to shoot to protect their own lives or those of other people.

"We have a whole new generation of young criminals out there, especially gang members, who have no value of life at all," Sampson said. "The bottom line is trying to balance public safety. It's a difficult balance."

Stiegler agrees officers have to be more careful on the street now, compared to when he started in law enforcement in 1985.

"It was certainly a different era," he said. "It is far more dangerous today for a police officer."

But Stiegler, a Laconia detective, said training in how to deal with deadly situations has improved tenfold, as has the equipment officers use, including Tasers, pepper spray and expandable batons.

The poor economy has made many people resort to crime out of desperation, he said.

"They are willing to do whatever they have to do to survive," he said. "Criminals are always getting more innovative in what they do."

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Jan. 6: Larry Minassian, 51, of Salem, shot by Salem police and injured when he threatened three officers with a sword outside his home.

March 2: Wayne Martin Jr., 29, shot and killed by police in Concord after a confrontation outside his home.

March 10: Angel Bermudez-Rosario, 28, of Dorchester injured in Plaistow while fleeing from sheriff's deputies. Deputy fired at car windshield, causing shattered glass to strike Bermudez-Rosario in the eye.

May 7: James Breton, 50, of Manchester shot and killed by a state trooper two days after he barricades himself and his 7-year-old daughter in his apartment.

May 19: Shelly Naroian, 47, of Hillsborough shot and killed by a Hillsborough police sergeant after she pointed a gun at him during a standoff.

June 27: Christopher Seksinsky, 39, shot and killed by a police officer in Winchester during a family dispute. Seksinsky approached police while armed with a knife.

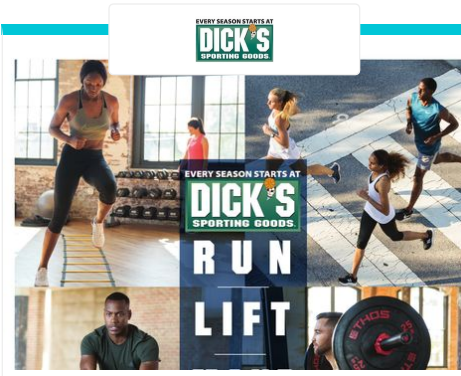
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