

Posted 9/21/20

EXPLAINING...OR IGNORING?

In a badly fractured land, the ambush of two deputies unleashes a raft of excuses. And, as usual, no solutions.

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Economically, Compton is in a lousy place. Nestled in a chronically poor area of Los Angeles, the incorporated community of about 95,000 suffers from a 21.9 percent poverty rate, about twice the national figure. As one might expect, Compton’s reputation crime-wise is also lousy. Its 2018 toll of 1,174 violent crimes and 22 murders yields rates of 1,200.7 and 22.5 per 100,000 pop., far higher than comparable figures for Los Angeles (747.6 and 6.4) and the U.S. overall (368.9 and 5.0).

Compton’s travails are long-standing. So when killings and such happen, it’s mostly families, friends and sheriff’s deputies who take notice (the city gave up its police department two decades ago). But when a still-unknown assailant snuck up on two deputies sitting in their patrol car, pulled a pistol and opened fire, the world paid attention. That attack, which took place on September 12, caused serious but thankfully non-fatal injuries and both officers are recovering.

Let’s place this event in context. LEOKA, the FBI’s Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted database, presently categorizes some assaults on officers as “unprovoked,” meaning they did nothing to prompt an armed exchange. Assaults on officers that involve “entrapment and premeditation” are coded as an “ambush.” This table sets out each category’s contribution to the felonious murder of law enforcement officers between 2007-2020 (this year’s data is thru 9/11):

Fatal attacks	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	TT
Officers killed	58	41	48	56	72	49	27	51	41	66	46	56	48	37	69
Ambush	9	1	6	2	2	3	1	11	7	19	5	11	2	8	87
Unpr. attack	7	5	9	11	6	1	4	1	3	3	3	1	5	2	61

We pored through the LEOKA for equivalent information about *firearm* assaults on officers, regardless of whether an injury occurred. Best we could do is this table, which

breaks out gun “ambushes” since 2014 (we believe that in this dataset “ambush” includes unprovoked attacks):

Firearm assaults on law enf. ofcrs.	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	TT
Total	1,950	2,018	2,377	2,677	2,116	11,138
Ambush	44	86	103	110	97	440

Bottom line: about five officers are assaulted with firearms in the U.S. each day. That’s a lot. While “only” four percent – about two per week – are attacked without warning, the threat of being surprised by a murderous gunslinger is real. That vulnerability [led the FBI to warn](#) that ambushes and unprovoked attacks had gone up about twenty percent during the course of a decade and urged that police adjust their protocols accordingly.

Of course, in this gun-besotted, violence-ridden land officers well know they could face gunfire during most any encounter. Here are four examples of ambushes and unprovoked attacks from past posts in our [Gun Control](#) section:

[April 2009](#): A mentally disturbed twenty-two year old would-be “White supremacist” gunned down Philadelphia police officers Eric G. Kelly, Stephen J. Mayhle and Paul J. Sciuolo and wounded two others. Police responded after his worried mother called 9-1-1 to complain about her son’s erratic behavior.

[October 2016](#): Palm Springs police officers Lesley Zerebny and Jose “Gil” Vega were shot and killed by a rifle-wielding twenty-six year old as they stood outside a home to which they were dispatched on a “simple family disturbance.”

[August 2019](#): California Highway Patrol officer Andre Moyer was shot and killed while “filling out paperwork” to impound a traffic violator’s car. His murderer was slain during a wild, protracted shootout with responding officers.

[November 2016](#): Des Moines police Sgt. Anthony Beminio and Urbandale, Iowa officer Justin Martin were murdered by the same killer in ambushes a half-hour apart. Both were found behind the wheel of their cars, still strapped to their seats.

POLICEISSUES.ORG

Unlike the above examples, neither had been on a call. Their middle-aged assailant, a “loner” with a history of troubled behavior, ultimately surrendered.

What distinguishes these attacks from the wounding of the L.A. County deputies? In part, their media coverage. The *Los Angeles Times* posted an initial account shortly after the ambush, [then updated it](#) after a news conference held the following morning. Its story mentioned that one of the deputies was thirty-one and was the mother of a six-year old, and that both she and her partner, a male in his early twenties, went through the academy together and had only been on the job slightly more than one year. Sheriff Alex Villanueva and Assemblyman Reggie Jones-Sawyer were both quoted as calling the attack “cowardly.” Here’s what L.A.P.D. Chief Michel Moore had to say:

Tonight we pray for these two guardians to survive. I recognize and acknowledge we live in troubled times. But we must as a community work thru our differences while loudly and resoundly condemn violence. Blessed are the Peacemakers.

Compton was going through a particularly troubled time. Less than two weeks had passed since deputies had shot and killed [Dijon Kizzee](#). An ex-con with convictions for illegally possessing guns, Mr. Kizzee was reportedly riding a bike on the wrong side of the street and fled on foot when deputies tried to stop him. When they closed in he allegedly punched one in the face, and as they scuffled supposedly dropped the handgun he was carrying. [Deputies said they fired](#) when he picked it up.

Mr. Kizzee’s killing [ignited raucous protests](#), which led to their own arrests. Police-citizen tensions were already at a high pitch, inflamed by [the recent killing of a Latino youth](#), shot dead by deputies who said he was armed, and by [deputies’ rough treatment](#) of a suspected looter, an event that a bystander captured on video. As one might expect, this context affected reporting. Only two days after the ambush [an L.A. Times article](#) featured an interview with a “long-time South L.A. activist” who questioned “why such swift calls for justice don’t come when it is the police who cause the injuries.” His comments were followed by a recap of recent alleged abuses, most notably the killing of Mr. Kizzee, and an interview with an academic psychiatrist who insisted that the link some made between “anti-police messaging” and the ambush (e.g., L.A. Sheriff Alex Villanueva’s “words have consequences”) was nothing more than “[confirmation bias](#),” the tendency for people to believe what supports their pre-existing views:

That’s a really, really important thing to point out, because you absolutely will get people who will spin this into meaning that these protests are causing problems.

POLICEISSUES.ORG

Well, we certainly don't want to fall into *that* trap. After all, we could get ambushed by, say, [Erika Smith](#)! In an extended "opinion" piece published *three* days after the attack, Ms. Smith, a key member of the *Times* editorial staff, scorned L.A. County Supervisor Kathryn Barger's concern that excessive public criticism of the police may have played a role. Here is what Ms. Barger had said:

I support peaceful protests. But what I don't support are the type of comments, especially the ones made outside a hospital, blocking an emergency room, where two deputies were fighting for their lives, and you had individuals chanting what they were chanting. So I believe that we have slowly crossed that line. And what you've seen is what has manifested in the shooting of those two deputies. I do believe that.

Indeed, [ABC News](#) and other reputable sources had reported that protesters who marched for Mr. Kizzee gathered outside the hospital where the deputies were being treated and chanted "death to the police" and "kill the police." While Ms. Smith agreed that this wasn't a good idea and called the deputies' wounding "a cruel and callous crime," she vigorously objected to the "insinuation" that the attack was caused by anti-cop activism. Supporting "the broader movement for racial justice and police reform," Ms. Smith then launched into a critique of local policing, from the shooting of Mr. Kizzee to the deputy cliques we wrote about in "[Two Sides of the Same Coin](#)."

So what "causes" ambushes? Looking on prior examples, [Richard Poplawski](#), the 22-year old white supremacist who murdered the Philadelphia police officers, was a deeply disturbed youth obsessed with guns and violence. [John Felix](#), 26, who killed the Palm Springs officers, was a volatile, deeply troubled former gang member and had served prison time for armed assault. [Aaron Luther](#), the middle-aged man who killed the CHP officer, was an ex-con with a history of violence. And [Scott Green](#), the middle-aged man who killed the Iowa officers, was an emotionally disturbed spouse abuser "whose life was unraveling." Still, none of these killings served an even remotely "functional" purpose. Our best guess is that they may have reflected a compulsion to assert oneself in the face of societal rejection. But we're not psychologists.

While there was plenty of speculation about their "cause," no one connected any of those murders to a greater social movement. No one suggested that officers were in effect bringing on their own demise. But times have changed. As the academic who shook off the connection between protests and the ambush well knew, "confirmation bias" can cut both ways. Maybe anti-police sentiment didn't embolden the ambusher.

POLICEISSUES.ORG

Maybe it *did*. Perhaps he had been acquainted with Mr. Kizzee or another alleged victim of police brutality. Maybe he had himself been brutalized.

Of course, we know nothing about the triggerman. But once we do, where would probing his reasons take us? Even if we somehow divine the causes of the deputies' ambush, Compton will remain saddled with the baggage that led City-data.com to place it among *the most crime-ridden four percent* of U.S. cities. That's really, really lousy company. To climb out of that hole would take a lot more than protesting police mistreatment. It would call for a frontal assault on poverty and the socioeconomic deforestation that poverty invariably produces. That would require the massive infusion of social and financial capital ("Marshall Plan") that we ceaselessly harp about in our "Neighborhoods" posts. Want to get started? Click on "[But is it Really Satan?](#)" Go to the [Bogalusa Daily News](#) and read what Washington Parish (Louisiana) Sheriff Randy Seal had to say.

Then, get busy!