

# War on police? Many officers fear growing tensions

George Hunter, The Detroit News

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(Photo: Robin Buckson / The Detroit News)

Has it become fashionable to lash out at police? Law enforcement advocates fear it's a growing trend in some circles.

Whether they're being shot at, cussed at, zapped with a stun gun or denied service at a restaurant, many police officers in Metro Detroit and across the country feel they're being disrespected more than ever.

"Everybody thinks it's cool to not talk to the police, and to hate the police," Detroit Police officer Ki'Juan Anderson said. "The bad guys love this. A criminal will commit a crime, and nobody wants to tell us what happened. We're trying to help them ... and they say 'get off my porch; I hate the police.'"

Anderson, who is assigned to the department's Gang Intelligence unit, was in the Special Operations crew of Kenneth Steil in September, when Steil was killed in a shootout with a carjacking suspect.

Since then, 10 Detroit officers have been shot in the line of duty, while shots were fired at several other officers, including an incident July 20 in southwest Detroit near Chamberlain and Elsmere. Officers were responding to a call of shots fired in the area when a man shot at them. The officers returned fire and the suspect ran away.

Since Steil was killed, "I feel like I'm going to get shot every day," Anderson said. "But I have to put that aside and go out there and do my job."

Nationwide, 143 officers were killed on duty last year, the most in five years, according to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund.

The organization's "Mid-Year Law Enforcement Officer Fatalities Report," released last month, found a 30 percent increase in line-of-duty deaths in the first six months of this year over the same period in 2016.

On Friday, six officers in Pennsylvania and Florida were shot, two fatally, in the space of a few hours.

"Most citizens are supportive, but we have a criminal element that has no reservations (about) shooting at cops," Detroit Police Chief James Craig said. "They buy into the ... anti-police rhetoric and they feel they have a green light to attack officers."

Singer Trey Songz, whose real name is Tremaine Neverson, [pleaded guilty Friday to two counts of disturbing the peace](https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2017/08/18/trey-songs-tremaine-neverson-pleads-guilty-disturbing-peace/104712910/) after he punched a Detroit police sergeant following a December concert at Joe Louis Arena. He was sentenced to probation and will serve no jail time.

During a free-speech rally Saturday in Boston, city police tweeted: "[#BPD](https://twitter.com/hashtag/BPD?src=hash) is asking individuals to refrain from throwing urine, bottles and other harmful projectiles at our officers."

Police say the anger against cops is manifested in ways other than violence. In several recent incidents, restaurant workers refused to wait on police officers. Late last month in New York, a Dunkin' Donuts employee allegedly told two officers, "I don't serve cops." New York officers began a boycott of the chain.

"I think this is one of the more challenging times that I've seen in this profession and I've been in it a long time," Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said. "I think there's a false narrative out there that police officers are quick to use force, quick to violence, quick to improper behavior."

Another indication cops have fallen out of fashion: [Police departments in Michigan](https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2017/01/01/police-officers-michigan-recruit/96074238/) and across the country are having trouble recruiting.

Kenneth Reed, spokesman for the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality, scoffed at the suggestion there's a war on cops.

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**Detroit Police Officer Ki'Juan Anderson, right, with Stephen Petroff, said he tries to offset anti-police feelings by trying to talk to citizens.** (Photo: Robin Buckson / *The Detroit News*)

"There's a war on the citizenry by law enforcement," Reed said. "There's an element of uneasiness and even fear among citizens, particularly among African descent and other brown people — especially when you have Donald Trump saying it's OK to brutalize people when they're taken into police custody."

During a speech last month at Suffolk County Community College in Long Island, New York, President Trump told a gathering of police officers: "When you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over (their heads)? I said, you can take the hand away, OK?"

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters: "I believe (Trump) was making a joke at the time," but the president's statement was roundly denounced by civil rights groups and police officials nationwide.

Videos shared on social media, including the April 2015 incident in which Charleston, South Carolina, police officer Michael Slager fatally shot unarmed black motorist Walter Scott in the back, has fueled the perception that all cops are bad, police officials say.

Slager, who pleaded guilty in May of willfully using excessive force to deprive Scott of his civil rights, is awaiting sentencing.

"Are there some problem officers? Absolutely, and nobody wants a dirty cop off the street more than we do," Michigan State Police Lt. Michael Shaw said. "But that's the small minority. All police are not like that, despite the perception by some."

Ray Winans, a former gang member who was convicted of manslaughter at age 15 and now mentors Detroit youths, said the chasm between police and citizens is the fault of both parties.

"There's a mistrust that goes both ways: Police hear horror stories about community members and believe them, and community members hear horror stories about the police and believe them," he said. "But it's not near as bad in Detroit as it is in other cities. That's because Chief Craig has done a good job being transparent and holding problem officers accountable."

Not all police officials say disrespect is on the rise. In Denton Township, near Houghton Lake, police Chief Dallas McGeary said he's seen more support recently than at any other time during his 18-year career.

"Maybe it's happening in the big cities, but I've had more people shake my hand and tell me they appreciate me now than ever," McGeary said.

Darnell Blackburn, district field representative for the Michigan Coalition on Law Enforcement Standards, which oversees training for officers statewide, said there's not necessarily a war on cops — rather, “there's a war on the moral fiber of society.”

“It's not just police who are being disrespected,” said Blackburn, a longtime police officer who is director of Prat LLC, a training consulting company that teaches cops conflict resolution skills and how to detect implicit bias.

“I think it permeates every aspect of society,” he said. “People don't respect politicians; they don't respect teachers or social service workers, or anyone in authority because there's been a decay in morals.”

Craig is among the law enforcement officials who say the hateful rhetoric and violence has ramped up since the 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson.

“That's another example of the narrative taking hold,” Craig said. “The investigation found Michael Brown wasn't shot in the back, his hands weren't up, and he tried to grab the officer's gun, but you still have people out here saying ‘hands up, don't shoot.’ It doesn't matter what the facts are.”

Craig said an [incident last month in which a citizen used a stun gun \(/story/news/local/detroit-city/2017/07/12/pair-charged-taser-cop/103644712/\)](#) on a police officer is another example of narrative over truth.

“The aunt comes out and says the woman only used the Taser because her brother was being beaten by Detroit officers,” Craig said. “We [released the video \(https://www.facebook.com/detroitpolice/videos/vb.103971016308779/1456694191036448/?type=2&theater\)](#) that refuted her allegations, but it's those kind of incidents that incite people.”

An FBI report released in May suggests several factors are influencing violence against police officers. “The Assailant Study — Mindsets and Behaviors,” studied 50 incidents in which officers were killed in the line of duty in 2016.

“The assailants inspired by social and/or political reasons believed that attacking police officers was their way to ‘get justice’ for those who had been, in their view, unjustly killed by law enforcement,” said the report.

Elected officials also have played a role in inflaming the public, the report said.

“Nearly every police official interviewed agreed that for the first time, law enforcement not only felt that their national political leaders publicly stood against them, but also that the politicians' words and actions signified that disrespect to law enforcement was acceptable in the aftermath of the Brown shooting,” the FBI report said.

Bouchard, head of government affairs for the Major County Sheriffs of America, said former President Barack Obama helped influence negative perceptions of police.

“He issued an order about police using military equipment without even asking what that equipment was used for,” said Bouchard, who said he tried unsuccessfully to persuade Obama the equipment was needed. “There was more emphasis on rhetoric than reality.”

Anderson, the Detroit Gang Unit officer, said he tries to offset anti-police feelings by respecting citizens, and trying to talk to them.

“I just try to reach somebody every day,” he said. “I'm always trying to talk people into seeing the logic of things. Don't listen to everything you've heard on Facebook.”

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