

Charges rare for police, data show; Researcher finds 90 officers arrested in law enforcement killings since '05; 32 convicted.

Darragh, Tim . Morning Call ; Allentown, Pa. [Allentown, Pa]09 Aug 2018: A.1.

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FULL TEXT

If it seemed surprising that a South Whitehall Township police officer would be charged Tuesday in the fatal shooting of an unarmed man 10 days earlier, that's because data show it is a rare event.

In recent years, police have shot and killed roughly 1,000 people a year, said Philip M. Stinson, a Bowling Green University criminologist who tracks deadly police shootings. Since 2005, he said, 90 police officers, state troopers or deputy sheriffs have been charged with murder or manslaughter, an average of about seven cases a year nationwide.

Of those 90 officers, 32 have been convicted - 16 by guilty plea and 16 by jury trial, Stinson said.

The Lehigh Valley saw its first such charges in years Tuesday when Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin on Tuesday charged officer Jonathan Roselle, 33, with voluntary manslaughter in the shooting death of Joseph Santos, 44, of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J. Roselle shot Santos, who was not armed, July 28 on Hamilton Boulevard, across from Dorney Park.

The charge Roselle faces is one that more frequently ends in conviction, according to Stinson's data. When police are convicted, Stinson said, it's usually a charge of manslaughter, voluntary manslaughter or involuntary manslaughter.

According to the data, 41 of the 90 officers charged fought their cases in court and walked out free. According to Stinson, 21 were acquitted at a jury trial, nine were acquitted at a bench trial, six cases were dismissed by a prosecutor, four were dismissed by a judge and in one case, no true bill was returned from a grand jury.

The remaining cases are pending, he said.

An officer is justified in using deadly force if the officer has a "reasonable apprehension" of imminent bodily injury or death, he said.

Stinson's data show that murder or manslaughter cases against police since 2005 usually amounted to single digits nationwide, and then spiked to 18 in 2015. It reached 16 a year later, and then fell to six last year. His records show five cases so far in 2018.

Stinson, a former police officer, said the data is up to date as of Monday.

The charge against Roselle comes as the number of deadly shootings of unarmed people by police is trending downward, according to The Washington Post. The newspaper has been keeping a nationwide database of fatal police shootings since the 2015 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.

According to the Post report from May, police in 2015 shot and killed 94 unarmed people. The number of unarmed people killed by police bobbed from 51 in 2016 to 68 in 2017, it said.

At the time of the report, 18 unarmed people, eight fewer than at the same time last year, died by a police shooting this year.

A researcher who reviewed the Post's data said he'd need more data before he could say it's a long-term trend. But Justin Nix of the University of Nebraska at Omaha said a combination of factors, including implicit bias training and a "Ferguson effect" - a concern over shooting an unarmed person - may have a cumulative impact on police

officers' approach to potential shooting situations.

At least for the last three years, Nix said, the decline has been "certainly noticeable."

The last local case that was ruled an unjustifiable use of deadly force was in 2015, when a grand jury decided that constable Howard "Chip" Altemos unjustifiably shot Kevin McCullers of Whitehall Township, who was wanted for unpaid parking tickets. Altemos pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor count of recklessly endangering another person and was ordered to serve two years of probation.

One of the last cases in which a local officer was jailed in a shooting case was former Easton police officer Scott Cameron, who served 18 months after pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter in the killing of John Rapp in 1998.

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OFFICERS CHARGED

U.S. police officers charged with murder or manslaughter since 2005:

2005: 1

2006: 7

2007: 11

2008: 4

2009: 3

2010: 5

2011: 1

2012: 5

2013: 4

2014: 7

2015: 18

2016: 13

2017: 6

2018: 5

Source: Philip M. Stinson, a Bowling Green University criminologist

Credit: By Tim Darragh - Of The Morning Call - tdarragh@mcall.com; Twitter @tmdarragh; 610-820-6691

Caption: South Whitehall Township police officer Jonathan Roselle, 33, has been charged with voluntary manslaughter in the fatal shooting of Joseph Santos on Hamilton Boulevard.

south whitehall police/

contributed photo

DETAILS

Subject:	Shootings; Murders & murder attempts; Deadly force; Manslaughter
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Company / organization:	Name: University of Nebraska; NAICS: 611310
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