

Beat: News

IN USA NUMBER OF COPS CHARGED WITH MURDER OR MANSLAUGHTER TRIPLES IN 2015

ON-DUTY SHOOTINGS HAS TRIPLED THIS YEAR

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USPA NEWS - The availability of video evidence has contributed to a sharp rise in manslaughter and murder charges against cops involved in shootings this year. In the past, the annual average was fewer than five officers charged. In the final weeks of 2015, that number has climbed to 15, with 10 of the cases...

The availability of video evidence has contributed to a sharp rise in manslaughter and murder charges against cops involved in shootings this year. In the past, the annual average was fewer than five officers charged. In the final weeks of 2015, that number has climbed to 15, with 10 of the cases.

'If you take the cases with the video away, you are left with what we would expect to see over the past 10 years, about five cases,' said Philip Stinson, the Bowling Green State University criminologist who compiled the statistics from across the nation. 'You have to wonder if there would have been charges if there wasn't video evidence.'

The importance of video was highlighted last week with the release of footage showing a Chicago officer fatally shooting a teenager 16 times. The officer said he feared for his life from the teen, who was suspected of damaging cars using a small knife. He also had a powerful hallucinogen in his bloodstream.

Over the last decade, law-enforcement agencies have recorded roughly 1,000 fatal shootings each year by on-duty police. An average of fewer than five each year resulted in murder or manslaughter charges against officers, Philip Stinson found.

'For forever, police have owned the narrative of what happened between any encounter between a police officer and a civilian,' said David A. Harris, a University of Pittsburgh law professor who has written extensively on police misconduct. 'What video does is it takes that power of the narrative away from the police to some extent. And that shift in power of control over the narrative is incredibly significant.'

In Marksville, Louisiana, for example, two deputy city marshals were charged with second-degree murder after authorities reviewed video from one of the officers' body cameras, which showed a man with his hands in the air inside a vehicle when the marshals opened fire. The man was severely wounded and his 6-year-old autistic son killed.

Just how dramatically a video can shift the balance of power was apparent in North Charleston, South Carolina, when officer Michael Slager shot and killed Walter Scott, an unarmed black man as he ran away after a traffic stop.

Likewise, prosecutors in Albuquerque, New Mexico, charged two officers with second-degree murder of a mentally ill homeless man who was holding two knives when he was shot to death. Defense attorneys have said the officers shot James Boyd out of concern for their lives, but Boyd appears to be turning away from the officers when the shots were fired.

Lisa Mearkle, a police officer in Hummelstown, Pennsylvania, was charged with third-degree murder, voluntary and involuntary manslaughter after shooting an unarmed man twice in the back as he laid face-down in the snow. But after watching a video that showed the man's hands repeatedly disappear under his body as Mearkle shouted at him to keep his hands where she could see them, the jury acquitted Mearkle.

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Ruby BIRD

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