

Life through a lens

Is the death of a police officer still viewed as a heinous crime by the public and media? Tina Orr Munro and Syreeta Lund report

When three police officers were murdered in cold blood in 1966, there was a public outcry. Their killer, Harry Roberts, was sentenced to 30 years in jail. That expired ten years ago. Roberts is still in prison, but in June he was given the go ahead to seek a judicial review over a failed parole bid.

Since 1829 there have been around 4,000 officers who have died or been killed on duty, according to the Police Memorial Day Trust. As far as the Police Federation is concerned those convicted of murdering police officers should remain in jail for the rest of their life, including Harry Roberts.

But concerns have been raised recently that police officer murders are receiving less media attention and that the public is becoming immune to this particular crime.

In June this year PC Jon Henry from Bedfordshire Police was stabbed to death just 30 minutes after beginning his shift when he responded to reports of an assault on a window cleaner.

His death received mixed coverage in the media. It featured on the front pages of four national newspapers. Most carried it elsewhere. In one paper it did not feature until page 12. PC Henry's funeral barely had any mention at all in the media.

Alan Gordon, vice-chairman of the Police Federation, says he is concerned about the impact of apparent decreasing interest by the media in the death of an officer.

"I remembered the public outrage after Harry Roberts killed three police officers. I can still picture the officers lying on the ground.

"There was a stigma attached to Harry Roberts. He didn't just kill three people, he killed three police officers."

In legal terms, the Police Federation

believes the murder of a police officer should be treated more seriously than other homicides.

"The Federation believes any murder is tragic, but we consider the murder of a police officer to be a more heinous crime as they are upholders of the law and preservers of the peace," says Mr Gordon.

As an officer with over 30 years' experience, he also feels the media and the public no longer share this belief, particularly with the recent killing of PC Henry.

"The Police Federation believes any murder is tragic, but we consider the murder of a police officer to be a more heinous crime as they are upholders of the law and preservers of the peace."

"It just seems that today there is less significance attached to police officers' murders unless there is what the media would call 'special circumstances' surrounding their deaths such as they are female officers or it is a result of terrorism.

"It just seems that there is a perception that it's a hazard of the job when a police officer is murdered. I thought it was most striking when PC Henry's death was closely followed Cheshire PC Richard Gray's death - who was shot dead while attending a domestic that it didn't command the same media attention. It made the headlines in a few papers, but was quickly superseded by other news. But the circumstances of his death were just as significant as any police officer's murder."

Mr Gordon also refutes the idea that the media are merely reflecting public opinion and that they are reporting what the public want to read.

"The media are instrumental in forming public opinion. If the public constantly sees something in the news, it will register it as significant. If it is just a snippet, they will not give it much thought and it is quickly gone from memory.

"If the media and the public start to disregard police murders and not look at them with the same outrage, it becomes an accepted part of society seen no differently from other sorts of crime."

The fear, says Mr Gordon, is that if less coverage and therefore seemingly less importance is attached to the murder of a police officer, this could ultimately impact on the length of sentence the murderer receives.

The other side



Stian Alexander: a police officer being killed is still a major story

Stian Alexander has been a journalist for ten years, working as a crime reporter on a regional paper before becoming a news desk editor at the *News of the World* and now working as a director of press agency Kent News and Pictures.

He has worked on numerous stories or been on the end of the phone

directing, reporters when news that a police officer has been killed comes in. "In my experience there is almost no other story that makes a news desk sit up and take notice than when a police officer is killed while on duty. Editors jump up as much as they would for a scandal involving Posh and Becks. There are perhaps four and five officers who may be killed in a year and every one of those are likely to be featured on the front page of both tabloids and

broadsheets the next day. I remember Sharon Beshenivsky when the news came through that she had been killed on duty and the coverage was almost constant.

He added that it was natural for other factors to influence where the story would appear, such as the gender of an officer, that a female officer being killed on duty is much rarer for example and if other events such as a terrorist attack occur at the same time, an officer being

killed may take up less column inches. "Readers still see killing a cop as one of the worst crimes anyone can commit because police officers are there to protect the public. People think that if cops, with all their training and protection, can be killed then it's much more likely for them to be killed too. People genuinely still get outraged about it; it's one less officer out there on the streets."

