

Opinion: Blue lives matter

By Ted Gaines

A handful of California families will find it hard to celebrate the holidays this year because they lost their fathers and brothers to senseless violence.

On Oct. 19, sheriff's Deputy Jack Hopkins of Modoc County responded to a disturbance call and was shot and killed in the line of duty. He was only 31. On Oct. 6, Los Angeles County sheriff's Sgt. Steve Owen was shot dead responding to a burglary. The two deaths are a somber reminder that for our peace officers, their lives are on the line every time they are on patrol.



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Each of these losses, hundreds of miles apart in our vast state, was a tragedy. But the same month, something far more sinister played out here, showing that America and our law enforcement have entered a new, more dangerous and shameful era that threatens the foundation of the lawful and civil society we enjoy.

Two Palm Springs police officers, Lesley Zerebny, 27, and Jose "Gil" Vega, 63, were murdered in a planned attack allegedly committed by John Hernandez Felix. These deaths did not occur during the commission of another crime, they were the crime. Felix reportedly set a trap for the officers and ambushed them, shooting them down in cold blood. It was not a one-off

event.

In late November, a San Antonio policeman was ambush murdered as well. And, devastatingly, this summer's hateful and violent anti-police protests culminated in the sickening assassination of five innocent police officers in Dallas. I only wish that the list were complete, but it's not.

Driven by the media's hysterical coverage of any shooting death that fits their political narrative of minority oppression at the hands of police, we're trending into an upside down world where the protectors are viewed as predators. That's wrong. It's the open, politically inspired murder of police that is the real "hate crime" epidemic.

In this overheated environment, it's little surprise that year-over-year law enforcement firearm-related deaths are up 67 percent in 2016.

This growing hostility toward the police is terrible for the men and women who serve to keep us safe, and it's changing the way they police, with distressing effect.

The "Ferguson Effect" describes a retreat from effective, proactive policing that has been one driver of a multi-decade crime decline that is in danger of reversing. It's a term rooted in the Ferguson police shooting of strong-arm robber Michael Brown, where the infamous and false "hands up, don't shoot!" became the big lie slogan of rioters, activists, and a complicit, left-wing media and political cabal.

Police around the country, fearful of becoming a media story, or tired of the jeering, snarling mobs that now surround and confront them in the course of their duties, have predictably begun interacting more cautiously and less frequently with the public, to dire effect.

In Chicago, for example, police stops were down 90 percent in the first part of 2016, compared to 2015. Shootings in that

city have skyrocketed. Heather MacDonald, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, blames the crime spike in Chicago (and other cities – it's not a Chicago-specific phenomenon) on the abandonment of "broken windows" policing that sees police actively intervening in small, low-level public enforcement crimes. This retreat leads to disorder and emboldens criminals to commit more serious crimes. It's a troubling shift in nationwide policing.

To make it worse, California is undertaking an unprecedented de-incarceration effort that is putting tens of thousands of criminals back out on the streets before their sentences are complete and making it more difficult to put offenders behind bars.

"Realignment," 2014's Proposition 47, and this year's Proposition 57, all send a strong message to California criminals that the state is not interested in punishing them for their crimes.

It seems simple to understand that if you introduce more criminals into society, the result will be more crime. True to form, California violent crime jumped 11 percent in the first six months of 2015, compared to 2014. Expect crime to spike even higher.

This is the worst possible time for the police to step back because they fear attacks, shaming or other fallout from simply doing their jobs to preserve law and order and keep us safe. The environment that has inflamed and emboldened sick criminals to murder public safety officers must change. It's a dangerous job where officers make life-and-death decision in a fraction of a second, and they deserve wide latitude from the public and our deepest thanks.

Are there abuses of police power and individual officers who use bad judgment? Of course. And it's incumbent on us to hold those bad actors accountable. But it's foolish to attribute

sins of the individuals to the whole profession.

FBI Director James Comey said in October that the “narrative that policing is biased and unfair ... threatens the future of policing.” Comey should not have stopped there. A media-fueled degradation of respect for law enforcement threatens much more than the future of policing, it threatens the safe, civil society that we take too much for granted.

Honor our police.

State Sen. Ted Gaines represents the 1st Senate District, which includes all or parts of Alpine, El Dorado, Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, Shasta, Sierra and Siskiyou counties.