

Reactions to Street Brutality Against Public Officers

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08th January 2025

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14635006

KEYWORDS

Street violence, violence against public officers, Malta, reactions, crime

ABSTRACT

Violence against law enforcement remains a critical issue; the Independence Day 2024 assault on two police officers in Hamrun went viral. This incident catalysed public outrage and legislative action, highlighting the urgency of addressing such violence towards the men and women in blue.

A brutal assault on two police officers in Hamrun, marked a pivotal moment in public and legislative response to violence against law enforcement. This incident was captured in viral footage that provoked widespread societal outrage and catalysed swift actions from the Executive, Judiciary, and Legislature. This paper examines the incident's implications, contextualized within a two-decade history of 3,587 recorded cases of violence against public officers. Despite a 75% reduction in physical assaults since 2013, the persistence of violence underscores the occupational hazards faced by law enforcement officials.

Key drivers behind the reduction in assaults include increased street-level policing, the

implementation of a Police Transformation Strategy, and the 2021 introduction of body-cams which have proven to deter violence and provide crucial evidence. The Hamrun assault highlighted gaps in deterrence measures, prompting legislative reforms to strengthen sanctions. These include higher fines, elimination of suspended sentences, and increased prison terms, with penalties up to €25,000 and seven years imprisonment.

The study evaluates the potential efficacy of these legal amendments in mitigating violence against officers while addressing societal concerns over proportionality and justice. It concludes that sustained reductions in assault rates will determine the success of these measures, marking a critical step toward enhanced safety and security for law enforcement personnel.

The paper examines the historical trends and recent reductions in violence against officers, driven by reforms such as community policing, body-cams, and the Police Transformation Strategy. Despite progress, gaps in deterrence led to swift legislative amendments, introducing higher fines, stricter sentencing, and enhanced penalties. The study evaluates these measures' potential to further reduce assault rates and enhance societal safety.

INTRODUCTION

The 2024 Independence Day assault on two Hamrun police officers marred that day for ever. A shocking free-for-all violent episode on the guardians of society disgusted everyone, even those used to the study of crime and criminality. The raw assault left nothing to the imagination, went viral and led to a series of condemnations, opportunistic statements and for some, a chance to gain some political brownie points that deviated comprehension of the seriousness of the multi-male/female assault, away from the brutality of it all.

This time round, this was not a case of moral panic where statements are issued based on hearsay or conjectures: this was pure unadulterated footage that everyone could relate to: two police guardians going about their daily routine being assaulted, body slammed and mob-

smashed. They fought back with the tools at hand but it was simply a numbers game with too many considerate (sic) citizens ready to lend a punch and a kick.

SOCIETAL IMPERATIVE

Societal reaction was rapid, condemning and unmerciful on those involved. Whilst still innocent until proven guilty, the public's reaction is unforgiving and called for action. The three powers of state geared their wheels, the Executive took those involved to task, the Judiciary initiated proceedings and the Legislative will now bear witness towards voting for legislative change.

BUT IS THERE A REAL REASON TO PUSH FOR SUCH?

The raw truth is not based on conjectures but real data. Stark numbers show that between 2004 and June 2024 there were 3587 cases of violence against public officers, peaking in 2013 when 262 cases were registered. Removing the intangible verbal assaults that do not leave physical evidence comprised of threatening, reviling, vilifying and resisting, the rest are stark physical assaults, the latter amounting to 1775 cases during that period. Even one offense is uncalled for, let alone such numbers (Formosa, S., Formosa Pace, J., 2024).

Zooming in on the past 10 years, one can elicit that from a peak of 175 physical assaults in 2013, this number has stabilised to an annual average of 45 cases since 2021, a 75% drop in cases. From one physical assault every two days, this has gone rapidly down to one case every 8 days. Is it enough? No, as each case is brutal and officers are injured. How many other disciplines inclusive of professionals, white collar or blue collar workers are assaulted every other day or every week? This job's hazards are real, documented and now in full viral visual mode (Formosa Pace 2017).

CAUSE AND EFFECT

What caused the cases to drop? There are various causes: i) a push to move more officers out of the offices and onto the street; ii) a Police transformation strategy tasked with reforming the

Force, now in its fourth year, iii) Community Policing Teams in most localities and iv) the 2021 introduction of body cameras (European Union, 2023). The first three were conceived to reduce crime in the physical domain (as against the digital and private domains where crime shows increasing trends). However, the (un)surprising drop in assaults immediately the body-cams were introduced in May 2021 is testament to the affect of such technologies both for the protection of citizens from police abuse and also protection of the same officers from violence. Awareness that the tech is recording serves as both a deterrent and as evidence for all parties when things go south.

Many a post-Hamrun debate ensued that the officers were not equipped properly is resultant of an easy armchair critic statement: both officers had their own type of equipment which were used. This is a difficult nut to crack. What would the critics have gone for? Should the officers have fired their firearm that resulted in a death or more, then the same would have been on the forefront clamoring the officers as trigger happy and citing brutality... hark back a few weeks to the 11th August 2024 Edward Johnston case, whose death incidentally followed three hours of negotiations involving 21 officers.

LEGISLATIVE OPERAND

The Hamrun case triggered a raw nerve. Irrespective of technology and boots-on-the-ground engagement, the call for deterrents leading to effective sanctions was pounced upon with new tools being proposed for the judiciary to act upon. Hotheads are still prone to unsocial behaviour, thus the call for the enhancement of the legal instruments.

The quick action is laudable. Review of the legal amendments pushed by the the Ministry for Home Affairs, Security, and Employment, depict significant changes on three levels: higher fines, the removal of the possibility of a suspended sentence and conditional liberty as well as increased prison sentences. Whilst the first might be deemed as a lesser-evil deterrent during an assault, the other two sanctions could reward aggressors with a sentence of up to seven years and a fine up to €25,000. Interestingly the amendments distinguish between violence

type, number of aggressors and means employed to commit the offense such as use of arms proper. The short sharp shock wrought by the changes should serve as a positive for legislators to work together and a a major wake up call for any emergent assault 'heroes' (Government Gazette, 2024).

If such changes will result in the lowering of the current 45 annual assaults on public officers, then a societal step forward in safety and security would have been achieved. Stats will prove or nullify this hypothesis over the next years.

There is no out of jail card this time round.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The 2024 Hamrun assault on two police officers serves as a stark reminder of the persistent risks faced by law enforcement and highlights the need to ensure protection of officers whilst on duty. While significant progress has been made in reducing violence against officers over the past decade—driven by strategic initiatives such as the Police Transformation Strategy, body cameras, and community policing—the incident revealed gaps in deterrence and enforcement mechanisms. The public outcry and viral dissemination of the event catalysed swift legislative reforms, highlighting the critical role of responsive governance in addressing emerging threats. The newly introduced measures, including higher fines, the removal of suspended sentencing, and increased prison terms, are rooted in a robust and multi-faceted approach to deter such incidents. By distinguishing between violence types, the number of aggressors, and means employed, the reforms aim to balance justice and proportionality while sending a strong message against unruly behavior. However, the long-term success of these measures hinges on consistent enforcement, societal support, and continued monitoring of their impact on assault rates.

This incident and its aftermath highlight the necessity of a dynamic and adaptable approach to

law enforcement policy. Ensuring officer safety is not just a matter of workplace security but a means to foster public trust and societal stability.

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