



policing **relations**

Pittsburgh police officials highlight examples of efforts to build bridges with local community members, but the outreach comes amid questions about police treatment of unarmed black residents.

By Rob Taylor Jr.

Pittsburgh government and police officials insist that improving police-community relations in the city is a priority for them.

They point to documents like the police bureau's 2018 annual report that describes how police officials regularly join the city's Department of Human Relations and Civil Service in recruiting job candidates at community events, churches and colleges. They highlight the recreational activities organized by Pittsburgh police across the city. They mention their more recent efforts, which include a decision by the police department to place the majority of its internal policies and procedures on the city's website in April, for all to view.

But none of these measures happened in a vacuum. In the past decade, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police has found itself in the eye of the storm concerning its officers' use of force against African Americans.

High-profile cases have included a 2010 incident in which Jordan Miles, an African American youth who was 18 years old at the time, was chased and beaten by three plainclothes Pittsburgh police officers in the city's Homewood neighborhood. Officers believed Mr. Miles was carrying a gun. No weapon was found.

In 2012, Leon Ford, then 19, was shot multiple times in his vehicle—and survived—after Pittsburgh police officers mistook him for another man during a traffic stop in Highland Park. No weapon was found on Mr. Ford either.

In both cases, an out-of-court settlement was reached: Mr. Miles received \$125,000 in 2016, and Mr. Ford was awarded \$5.5 million in 2018.

Because legal proceedings involving each man were in the spotlight for years, many still remember the police encounters that sparked them, especially African Americans in Pittsburgh. The incidents serve as a backdrop for the upbeat police-community activities that officials identify—and that have received community support.

For example, officers from the city police department's Zone 5 sponsor an annual open house event outside its building in Pittsburgh's Highland Park neighborhood, drawing hundreds of residents from the city's African American community. The event features meet-and-greets with officers, free food, face-painting and other games.

The police bureau also sponsors an annual "Cops and Kids" summer camp, where children interact with police, fire and emergency medical services personnel to learn about their work as well as play sports and go on field trips, with free breakfast and lunch offered during the four, five-day sessions.

And when city police posted internal policies and procedures online in April, Chief Scott Schubert publicly described the move as a way of "being transparent... transparency fosters trust."

Within these regulations is an entire section devoted to "use of force," defined by Pittsburgh police as "the amount of effort required by police to compel compliance from a person." The City of Pittsburgh "expressly forbids any use of force that is excessive," with excessive force defined by the department as "the use of force which exceeds the level that a reasonable officer might reasonably believe, at the time of the incident, is necessary under the circumstances of a particular incident."

According to the policies, Pittsburgh police should use only a level of force that is reasonably necessary to carry out an arrest, gain compliance, or protect the officer or others from physical harm. Police cannot use neck restraints or similar control techniques, which could cause serious injury to another person, unless the officer is involved in a deadly force encounter.

And the use of deadly force is permissible if the action is in defense of human life, including the officer's own life, or when the officer believes that deadly force is necessary to prevent the arrest from being defeated by resistance or escape. Deadly force is also allowed when the person to be arrested "has committed, or attempted, a forcible felony or is attempting to escape and possesses a deadly weapon, or otherwise indicates that the person to be arrested will endanger human life or inflict serious bodily injury unless arrested without delay."

These policies on deadly force mirror the state of Pennsylvania's laws regarding the use of deadly force for police officers.

Pittsburgh policies also require that police give a verbal warning, "if feasible," prior to the use of deadly force by an officer. In addition, all police personnel who are authorized to carry firearms must receive in-service



Pittsburgh police community activities include officers such as David Shifren (below) teaching local youth how to play chess, and members of the Pittsburgh Bike Unit and other officers taking students on biking outings (above).

training, at least once per year, on the agency's use of force and deadly force policies.

"We take incidents involving use of force very seriously, and that starts at the [police] academy. While the state mandates that all recruits/cadets receive 56 hours of defensive tactics training, our recruits get more than double that," Chief Schubert said.

"We add the extra training, including hours of scenario-based training, for the safety of our officers and the people they encounter on duty, because we want our officers to be absolutely prepared, and because we want them to use force only when necessary.

"We also emphasize de-escalation techniques and teach de-escalation in everything we do so that incidents that might turn violent remain peaceful. Continuous training, including Implicit Bias and RITE [Racial Intelligence Training and Engagement] training—which all supervisors recently attended—also plays an important role. It's clear that our efforts are paying off, as we have a significantly lower use of force rate than other police departments in major metro areas."

Chief Schubert added that his department has been successful at "building bridges" to the communities they serve, calling those community-police relations "a priority of Pittsburgh police."

But the efforts by Pittsburgh police to improve community relations hasn't translated to an increase of African Americans on the city's police force.

According to the bureau's 2018 annual report, there were 28 black female and 89 black male members of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, for a total of 117, which accounted for 13% of the entire force. In 2010, the percentage of African Americans on the force was 17%, representing a total of 143. In 2018, 84 police recruits graduated—only four were African Americans. In the City of Pittsburgh, African Americans comprise about 24% of the population.

"The bureau wants a more diverse police force," said Chris Togneri, the city's public information officer. "Of course, here in Pittsburgh we are facing the same issues and challenges as other major city police departments in terms of recruiting.

"We also understand that change doesn't happen overnight. But we are committed to promoting diversity and inclusion, and our actions demonstrate that commitment." h

