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Addressing racial bias in police officers

Experts are split on how well screening and diversity training work

by ALLISON GEYER JULY 29, 2015



JOE ANDERSON

Two months ago, a Facebook comment sparked a controversy that ended the law enforcement career of Dane County Sheriff's Deputy James Myers.

"Send them to Chicago," he wrote in response to a news article about an increase in shootings around Madison. "Then nuke Chicago."

It's a familiar refrain among those who seek to blame crime on African Americans who have moved to Madison from the Midwest's largest city. And while Myers didn't mention race, the racial implications of his statement were well understood, particularly by those who seized on his comment and called for his termination.

But Myers' Facebook post wasn't the first time the deputy had been disciplined for racist speech, according to his personnel report, obtained by *Isthmus* in an open records request.

In 2007, he was suspended without pay for five days after he made "inappropriate comments" to two different deputies in the men's locker room of the Dane County

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Public Safety Building, referencing a promotional announcement from Dane County Sheriff Dave Mahoney encouraging minorities and women to apply for positions within the department.

In the report, Myers also admitted to “having other conversations at work regarding minorities and women in the promotional process.” In addition to his suspension, he was required to complete diversity training.

Myers, like other sheriff’s deputies in Dane County, had gone through a screening process when hired that is designed to root out officers with overt as well as implicit biases. Implicit biases are unconscious, involuntarily held prejudices that can profoundly affect a person’s attitude and behavior. And police officers are certainly not immune.

“Given the racist nature of our society, there’s always going to be police attitudes that surface from time to time that are evidence of a deeper, implicit bias,” says Christopher Ahmuty, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin. “It’s sort of unconscious.”

Calls to address bias among police officers have grown louder in recent years as a spate of unarmed African American young men around the country have been fatally shot by white police officers. Here in Madison, 19-year-old Tony Robinson died in March after being shot by Madison Police Officer Matt Kenny, who has been **exonerated of any wrongdoing** by the District Attorney’s Office.

Mahoney says his department works hard to identify the best applicants for the job and to keep on top of biases that could affect job performance. “We go through great expense to hire the most qualified and most balanced individuals to fulfill our responsibilities as law enforcement officers,” Mahoney says. “If you’re a deputy sheriff working in the jail and the only contact you have with people of color are people who are in jail, if you don’t maintain a larger, broader vision, it can impact your perception. That’s why ongoing training is important.”

But the jury is out on just how effective screening and diversity training are at identifying problem officers or cultivating cultural sensitivity.

Implicit biases are shaped by early life experiences and media consumption, and the mental constructs are pervasive throughout society — even if they don’t necessarily reflect values that society endorses.

Racially prejudiced views are problematic in any professional field, but perhaps none more so than law enforcement, where officers have the authority to detain, and are armed with deadly weapons. Overt biases, such as racial profiling, and other forms of discrimination are illegal, but law enforcement agencies are now focusing on implicit biases in the hiring and ongoing training of officers.

As a standard practice, Wisconsin law enforcement agencies evaluate new hires for potential prejudices and incorporate cultural competency education as part of their training. The screening process involves a psychological evaluation, done through a written test and a series of interviews, which help filter out candidates who show biased opinions or antisocial behavior.

Diversity training is also a tool to remediate officers who have been disciplined for inappropriate racial comments.

But does the training actually help change implicit bias? For Myers, who completed his mandatory training only to be forced into retirement a few years later after making a similar mistake, the answer would appear to be no.

Mahoney acknowledges that the training can only go so far. “We can have an eight-hour, 20-hour, 40-hour course, but I don’t know if that is going to address a flippant statement on the part of a deputy sheriff that jeopardizes the trust the public places

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[in him],” Mahoney says. “It’s an individual understanding of our roles and responsibilities.”

Still, educational efforts remain a priority. In addition to continuing education through regular in-service training, which covers a variety of policing topics, the Dane County Sheriff’s Department plans to allocate \$34,000 in additional funding in its 2016 budget to train officers on implicit bias. The last time the department conducted bias and diversity training was two years ago.

The Madison Police Department has also made efforts to incorporate implicit bias education into its regular in-service training. But experts say it is difficult to say just how effective these efforts are.

“Scientists have searched for more than 50 years for all kinds of screening techniques, but it’s just the case that none of these are reliable predictors of future behavior,” says Markus Brauer, a professor of psychology at UW-Madison who studies diversity and discrimination. “There’s no foolproof method.”

Screening may help eliminate extreme outliers, such as overtly racist individuals, but it’s easy to respond to screening tests in a “socially desirable” way, Brauer says, meaning that individuals who knowingly harbor bias can slip through.

Unconscious biases, on the other hand, are more difficult to control for and can be influenced by whatever news articles or entertainment media an individual has recently consumed before being tested.

To make matters more confusing, Brauer cited a recent meta-analysis study conducted by graduate students in his department showing no correlation between implicit bias and behavior.

“It could be that we haven’t measured it right or that we haven’t discovered that link yet,” he says.

Diversity education and training for employees can be helpful, but only if top management also endorses and promotes the values, Brauer says. Among corporations in particular, reconceptualizing diversity acceptance as essential to achieving business goals has been shown to have a positive effect.

Still, Brauer says, the empirical evidence is lacking.

“[Diversity training] is a \$10 billion per year industry in the United States, but there’s virtually no work examining whether [it] has any effect. “It’s not that diversity training can never work, but we need to test its effectiveness in randomized control trials.”

Capt. Thomas Snyder, who oversees training for the Madison Police Department, says his agency goes above and beyond state-mandated requirements for cultural competency and relational skills training.

But the department does not collect data to measure the outcomes, and Madison has increasingly drawn scrutiny for the disproportionate numbers of African Americans in the criminal justice system. “We recognize there is a need,” Snyder says. “[Implicit bias training] is just part of our role in mitigating racial disparity.”

Patricia Devine, another UW-Madison psychology professor who studies racial prejudice, began working with the Madison Police Department a decade ago educating officers about the nature of implicit bias and how it relates to interactions with citizens. “It’s incredibly important that MPD was open to looking at itself, wanting to do better, wanting to learn,” she says.

Devine used stereotype replacement exercises and counter-stereotypic imaging techniques to encourage police officers to think about African Americans who defy negative stereotypes. Perspective-shifting scenarios in which officers “put themselves

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in the shoes” of African Americans encouraged officers to challenge and address their beliefs about minorities.

Overcoming implicit bias takes a two-pronged approach, Devine says.

“First and foremost, you have to become aware,” she says. “Then you have to be motivated — and some people won’t be.”

Devine admits she had some stereotypes about officers before she went into the training — perhaps based on preconceived beliefs that individuals who work in law enforcement tend to be tough or rigid.

But through her research, she found that in some instances Madison police officers actually showed less bias than those not in law enforcement. In one study using computer simulation, Devine’s students at UW were more likely to shoot unarmed black suspects than unarmed white suspects. The police officers in the study did not show the same bias — a factor Devine credits to their training.

“I found that these people were eager for information, really thoughtful and asked great questions,” she says. “I found them to be tremendously engaged.”

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