

Most states neglect ordering police to learn de-escalation tactics to avoid shootings

STORY: [Curtis Gilbert](#)



In 34 states, training decisions are left to local agencies. Most, though, conduct no, or very little, de-escalation training. Chiefs cite cost, lack of staff, and a belief that the training isn't needed.

May 5, 2017

At just after noon on Nov. 17, 2015, a tall, light-haired man drove his car right up to the front door of Jerry's Country Meat, the only grocery store in Arlington, Ga. He entered and proceeded to stalk up and down the aisles, quoting scripture and singing.

The man had been hanging around the town of 1,400 for nearly a week, sitting in his car, which bore Alabama license plates, and staring at people outside the local bank.

If anyone questioned him, he said he was looking for someone, but he wouldn't say who. The man was white, 58 years old.

Inside the store, he asked the cashiers and deli workers whether they believed in God. "When they said, 'yes,' he went to ranting and raving at them," recalled owner Jerry Scarborough. "He was telling them all to get out" and that they were fired.

"The only thing he said to me ... was that I was fired and to turn in my keys," Scarborough said, "all 14 of them."

One of the store's employees, Dusti Mackey, called 911 to report the stranger, telling the operator, "I think something's mentally wrong with him. Like I think maybe he's crazy."



Photo Report: [Dusti Mackey, one of the employees of Jerry's Country Meat in Arlington, Ga., after being shot while fighting an Early County sheriff's deputy in November 2015.](#) Courtesy of Billy Fleming | Early County News

Sgt. Mickey White was off-duty at the time, driving his squad car home from his shift at the Early County Sheriff's Office. There were no other police nearby when the call came in, so White took it. By the time he rolled up to the store, the man was back in his car, stopped in traffic, waiting to get through a construction zone.

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There are no unassailable, scientific studies showing that de-escalation training leads to fewer police shootings. But anecdotal evidence abounds.

Many larger departments have implemented the training, such as those in New York, Chicago, Dallas, Las Vegas, and Minneapolis. The department in Ferguson, Mo., made changes due to a consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice.

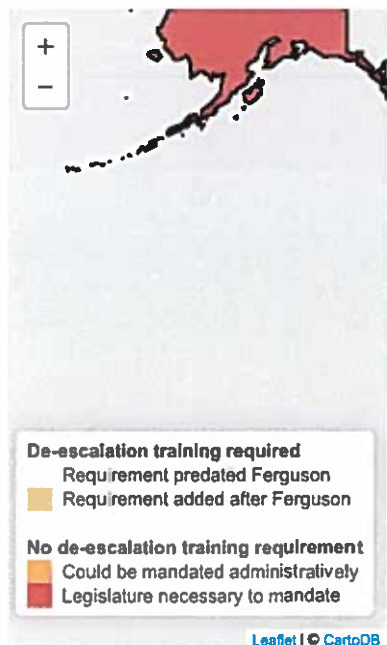
So far, some of the departments have reported reductions in use-of-force incidents.

The Dallas Police Department, for example, saw an 18 percent drop in use of force the year after it instituted de-escalation training. In addition, since 2010, excessive force complaints there have dropped by 83 percent. Las Vegas, also, has reported a reduction in use of force and officer-involved shootings, which fell by more than half between 2012 and 2016, to just 10.

Those who haven't implemented the training are sending a message that curbing use of force isn't a high priority, said Frank Zimring, a law professor at University of California-Berkeley who studies police shootings. "De-escalation is going to work only when saving civilian lives becomes an important objective of police administration and training," he said.

Which states require de-escalation training

After a police officer killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., on Aug. 9, 2014, activists, law enforcement educators and even a presidential task force called for changes in how police are trained. In particular, they argued police need better techniques in de-escalating tense situations. Since Brown's death, only eight states have mandated such training for all officers. Today, 34 states have no such mandate. In 24 of those states, however, there is a police-training board — called a Peace Officer Standards and Training board — that could have acted to require the training for police officers. Click on each state for more information.



SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY: Training requirements and dates for each state were gathered through interviewing members of the state's police officer standards and training board or through the relevant legislation that created the training requirement. Data on police shootings came from databases assembled by the Washington Post and The Guardian. Will Craft | APM Reports

Learning from the street

Versions of de-escalation training have been around for decades, but it entered the spotlight in 2015, when President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing released its [final report](#).

The report prioritized de-escalation training for all police departments and emphasized the need for officers to establish a "guardian" mindset rather than a "warrior" way of thinking. It followed a spate of police shootings, many graphically playing out on cell phone video as the public watched and demanded to know whether the deaths could have been avoided.

But an APM Reports examination of training records from hundreds of police departments — focused on the states with no de-escalation training requirement — reveals that most conduct no, or very little, de-escalation training.

A deeper look into the records of 34 officers who shot unarmed people in 2015 and 2016 shows that more than half had obtained two or fewer hours of de-escalation training since at least 2012. Only one officer had received 40 hours, which is considered optimal.

"The problem is, with 18,000 police departments [in the U.S.], you don't have any kind of uniform standards," said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, which has been working to establish a de-escalation training model. The organization's "30 Guiding Principles on Use of Force," developed with input from chiefs and sheriffs nationwide, emphasize "proportionality," "de-escalation," and "the sanctity of human life," meaning all lives, not just officers' lives.

"We never blame individual police officers for actions that they take, because when we look at the training that they receive, they're simply doing what their training told them," he said.

Moreover, Wexler believes the training emphasis is misplaced. He says officers are well-schooled in using firearms but less so in de-escalation tactics and communication.

Among more than 280 law enforcement agencies, new recruits received an average of 58 hours of firearms training and just eight hours of de-escalation training, according to the results of a 2015 survey by Wexler's organization.

When it came to veteran officers, who usually must fulfill a yearly in-service training requirement, only 65 percent of the agencies taught de-escalation techniques. But those that did spent only 5 percent of their time on the topic, compared to 18 percent on firearms.



Derek Collins Curtis Gilbert | APM Reports

Derek Collins, a police de-escalation trainer in Marietta, Ga., thinks training priorities need to change. He watched the dashcam video of the Touchtone shooting with a reporter. "He's dead?" Collins asked. "Over that? He's dead? That makes no sense."

Officers need to "practice patience," he said, adding that it appears White tried to resolve the situation too quickly, especially given that Touchtone was unarmed. "Things don't have to be resolved within the first 30 seconds Let him sing all day. Let him stand outside his car and sing until backup comes."

It's not the first time White shot an unarmed man. In 2009, he tried to arrest a man after responding to a family dispute. The man resisted and began fighting White, who shot him, but not fatally.

Early County Sheriff William Price doesn't question White's handling of the Touchtone call.

"You can what-if that situation from nigh on 'til forever," Price said. "A lot of folks don't realize we have two seconds to make a decision. People sit around the table and judge us all day. It was a justified shooting. That's just basically it. So it had nothing to do with his training. He was well-trained.

"In certain situations, yeah, you may approach a certain situation a certain way," Price said. "But in that situation, boom, bam, it happened."

Police shootings tend to unfold quickly. The shots that killed Touchtone were fired just 35 seconds after White's arrival. For Brown it was two minutes. For Rice, it was just two seconds.

De-escalation training is designed to help officers slow the action down, in order to afford them more than a few seconds in which to make a decision. Yet Early County has not implemented the training, and Price questions its value. In his view, the ability to connect with people is a skill that comes with experience.

"The first five years of my law enforcement career, I about had to fight everybody to put them in the car to arrest them," he said. "The next five years, it was a lot easier to talk them into getting in it. Over 27 years of experience, on-the-job training is the best you can get. Can't nobody teach you how to de-escalate, nobody other than the streets itself. You'll learn quickly."



Sheriff William Price Curtis Gilbert | APM Reports

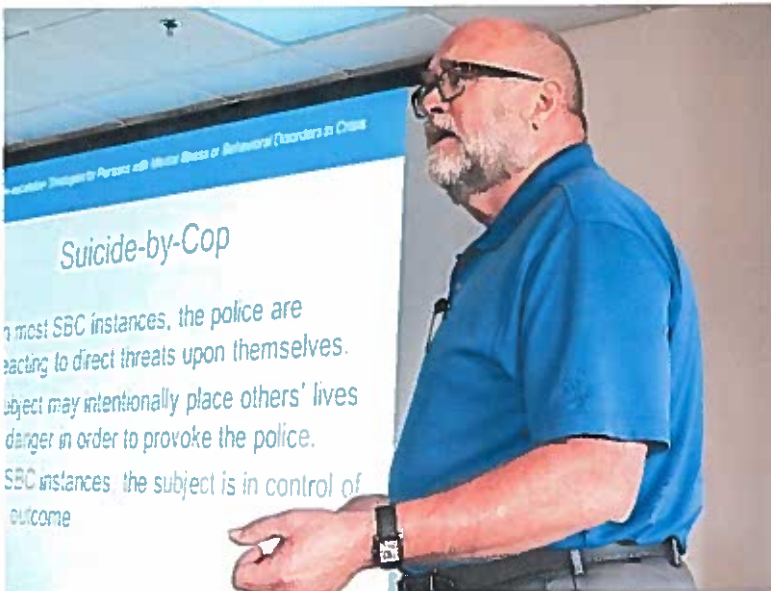
Slow down, make a connection

Paul Monteen, a retired police chief from Crookston, Minn., stood at the front of a classroom inside a non-descript government building in Center City, an outer-edge Minneapolis suburb. "Don't ask questions that can be answered yes or no, because I will guarantee you, you will get a yes or a no," he explained to the officers and other public employees at a free, day-long de-escalation class a few months ago.

"You won't find anything out. You need to open-end those questions. You know, 'What's bothering you? You're mad. How come you're mad?' — so that people will tell you what they're thinking about," he said.

This is what de-escalation training looks like.

Monteen was explaining how to connect with people in crisis to avoid violence. There was one message he hammered: Buy yourself some time. "Slow down," he said. "Back off. Take cover. You don't have to win."



Paul Monteen Curtis Gilbert | APM Reports

Like many states, Minnesota has been rocked by recent police shootings, including the 2016 death of Philando Castile and the 2015 shooting of Jamar Clark. It's also among the 34 states that don't require all police departments and sheriff's offices to train officers in de-escalation.

Perhaps because of the Castile and Clark tragedies, today there's a bill in the Minnesota Legislature that would require every officer in the state to receive 16 hours of instruction and provide \$10 million to cover the cost. In the meantime, the state offers grants that pay for free training classes — like the one in Center City — for any law enforcement agency that wants them.

Traditionally, officers have been trained to move quickly, take charge, and rapidly resolve a situation, said Bill Micklus, an officer for 29 years who serves as associate director of the Upper Midwest Community Policing Institute and who designed the eight-hour class curriculum.

But that approach can be counterproductive, he said, especially with someone experiencing mental or emotional problems. "Moving quickly isn't always the best alternative for people in crisis," he said. "They can't assimilate. They can't change. They can't turn on a dime and just be okay because we order them to. Doesn't work that way."

At the end of the class, the police and social workers break into small groups for role playing. In one of the role-playing groups, Jean Ramthun, who works in Chisago County's Health & Human Services department, was assigned to play an agitated Alzheimer's patient named Charles. "Okay, I'm having a temper tantrum," she said. "The nurse just made me mad."

Deputy Ryan Edmonds, from the Chisago County Sheriff's Office, asked, "Why does she make you mad, Charles?"

Ramthun responded: "I just. I don't know. I don't know where it is. I haven't seen my stuff. Maybe Claire knows where it's at."

Edmonds, trying out a technique called "active listening," asked, "Claire?"

The idea is to show you've been paying attention by repeating the last thing someone said and turning it into a question. "We can certainly ask Claire," Edmonds said. "And who is Claire to you?"

This wasn't Edmonds' first time in a de-escalation class. He took one a couple of years ago. But he said when he was a new officer, he wasn't exposed to these concepts. "I went through basic training 12 years ago, and they didn't have any of the same or similar topics," he said. The emphasis was on use of force, not on communication or listening skills. Now, he uses this training every day on the street. "It works really well," he said.

Evidence suggests that officers who go through de-escalation training come away with more sympathetic attitudes toward people with mental illness. A 2014 study from Emory and George Washington universities analyzed the use of force at six policing agencies in Georgia. Officers trained in crisis intervention techniques were more likely to verbally engage mentally ill people during interactions. They also were more likely to call for mental health transport than to simply haul them to jail.



Derry Touchtone with his sister, Cindy Capps. Courtesy of Touchtone family

Ask, tell, make

Derry Touchtone's mood swings and delusions started when he was in his early 20s. Though his criminal record reveals only a 1996 misdemeanor for making harassing phone calls, he did occasionally encounter law enforcement during his bouts with mental illness. That ended after he was confronted by deputy sergeant White on a street outside Jerry's Country Meat.

"My first words were, 'I don't care,'" said his 30-year-old son, Clint Touchtone, who hadn't seen his father in a decade.

Touchtone, who has an easy grin, sat on the couch at his mother's house outside Birmingham, Ala., where he's lived since getting out of prison last year. "Just a lot of resentment at that time coming out," he said. "I really didn't want to deal with it, but that was selfish. He ain't never coming back. That settled down on me. Then I kind of got haunted. It took a toll on me. It kind of messed with me."

Thinking about the violent manner in which his father died is difficult. "It's kind of depressing, knowing that was the last thing he seen there," Touchtone said. "It just seems like it was uncalled for — the whole scene.

"I miss him," he said.



Clint Touchtone Curtis Gilbert | APM Reports

Markeita Bullard was well aware of Derry Touchtone's problems. She was the landlady at the trailer park where he lived for more than a decade and one of two mental health counselors at the local clinic. Touchtone could be a good friend, she said. "There was this old black lady that he loved, and she loved him. And he would go catch fish out of the river and bring them to her. And she would cook for both of them. I mean he was just that kind of person."

As a mental health worker, Bullard took a class in de-escalation. And she thinks more officers should do the same. "I have a lot of respect for most of the law enforcement people, but ... they need training in this area," she said.

Beyond mental health crises, Bullard said the training could help police better deal with drug addiction, domestic violence, and angry parents watching their children taken from their homes by protective service workers. "All of these are volatile situations and they have the potential to blow up in your face," she said.

Last year, the Minneapolis Police Department began putting all 800 of its officers through an intensive, week-long version of de-escalation training.

At a press conference in August, Police Chief Janee Harteau announced the effort, asserting that it represented a significant shift in the way officers would approach their jobs. "As a society, frankly, we have taught and told officers we want very quick resolution," she said. "Hurry up and answer that call. Get to the next call. Hurry up and resolve the situation. He's got a knife. He's got a gun. Take care of that quick. And we're saying, 'Slow down.'"

The training is an attempt to change the very culture of the department. "We have added 'sanctity of life' in our policy as the cornerstone of our use-of-force policy," Harteau said. "In life-threatening situations, preservation of all life is held in the highest regard."

When Officer Jennifer Lazarchic started at the department 21 years ago, she was taught three simple steps to get people to comply with her orders: Ask, tell, make. "Ask them to do what you'd like them to do," said Lazarchic, who has completed the de-escalation course. "If that doesn't work, tell them to do what you'd like. And then when that doesn't happen, you make them. That's still true. You still want to make them. We still have to accomplish our goal. But what we're doing is we're giving the officers more tools to do that."

In January, Lazarchic got the opportunity to use some of those tools.

She received a call about a homeless man in downtown Minneapolis screaming at people and accusing them of trying to steal his cell phone. "My partner and I got there and he was sitting on the ground," she said. "Twenty years ago that would have been: 'Okay, you go on one side of him. I'll go on the other. We'll both grab an arm and we'll cuff him and take him to the hospital.'"

Instead, Lazarchic knelt in front of the man. She made eye contact and started a conversation. "I just was very honest with him, and let him know I thought that his behavior appeared paranoid," she said. "And he basically started crying. In having this conversation with him, and continually reassuring him that I wanted to help him and not hurt him, he started to talk about wanting to go to the hospital."

Lazarchic got the man into an ambulance without using handcuffs.