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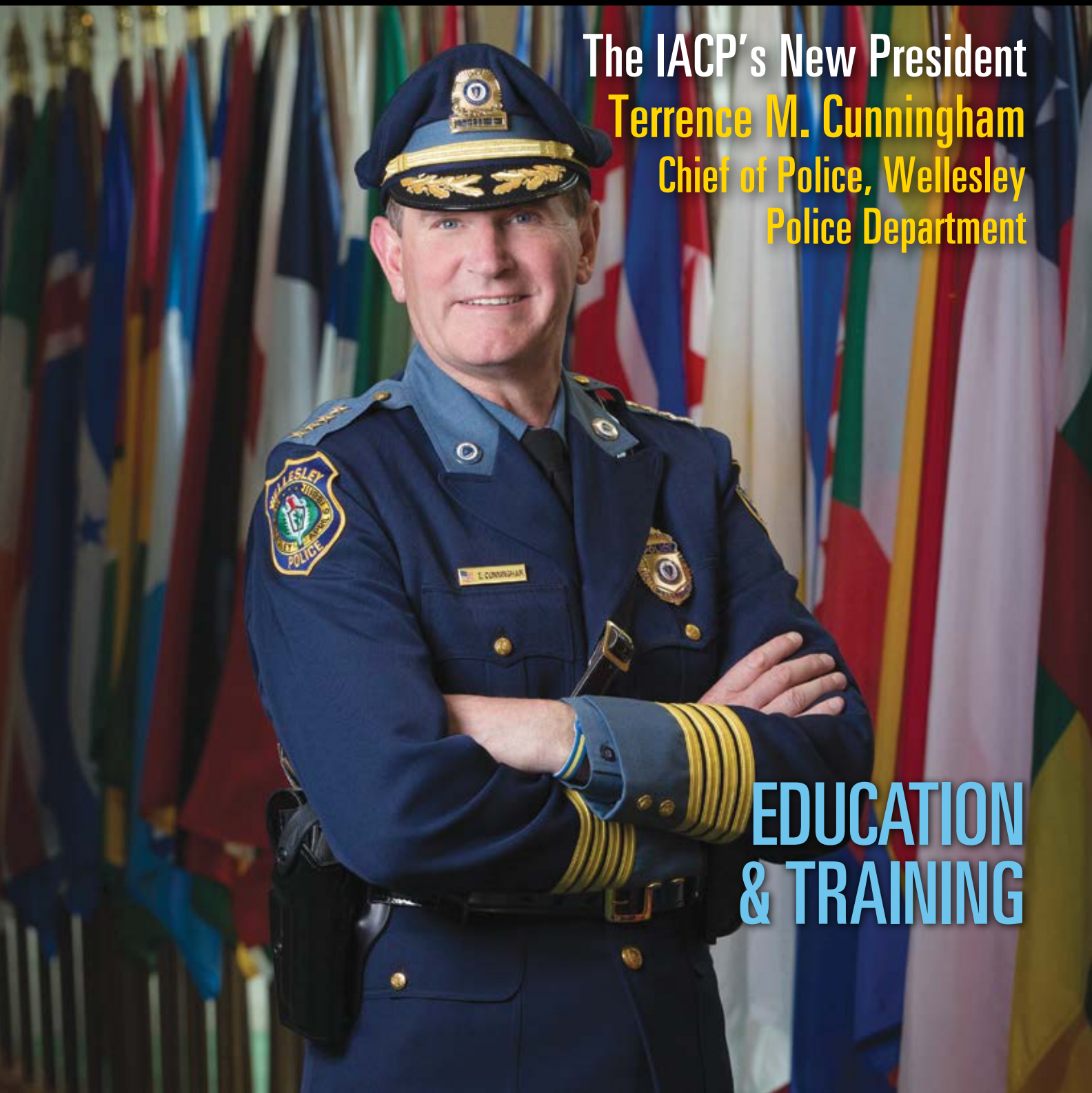

The IACP's New President

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EDUCATION & TRAINING

Training to Work Effectively with Youth: Reflect on the Past and Retool for the Future

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Once upon a time, there was a uniform that commanded respect and communicated trust. A few words and a stern look from the officer wearing the uniform could often be counted on to correct a youth's errant behavior. That time is mostly gone. The question is now what, if anything, can replace it?

Today, law enforcement officers should learn and use a more effective means of communicating with youth. It must be a form of communication that is youth-specific and that can quickly and safely de-escalate interactions with angry and aggressive youth. It must be based on the latest scientific understanding about how and why youth get angry and aggressive and what tactics will successfully calm them. Just as officers need to learn how to clear their weapons when they jam, they must now learn to clear a youth when he or she "jams." Lives can literally depend upon this knowledge.

Over the last 50 years, there have been an increasing number of government and academic publications, including research from the IACP, identifying a worsening relationship between law enforcement and youth, especially minority youth. This deterioration in relations has had wide-ranging impacts beyond officer-youth encounters and can be seen in officer confrontations with parents, neighborhoods, and communities. What has not changed in that time period is the basic training officers receive on how to work effectively with youth—none.

Specialized training such as juvenile interviewing techniques, school safety, the Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP), and diversion programs have been developed, but none of those teach patrol officers who regularly encounter angry and aggressive youth how to effectively talk, work, and interact with them in a manner that promotes officer and youth safety through de-escalation. Volatile, loud, and obnoxious youth challenge the authority and test the patience of even the most seasoned officers. Verbal judo and its progeny were designed for use on adults, and research clearly shows that what works with adults frequently does not work with youth. What's a frustrated officer to do?

If the encounters themselves are not troubling enough, law enforcement confrontations with youth are often damning when viewed through media lenses that focus first, second, and third on officer actions and, only as an afterthought, upon youth "victim" actions that were delinquent, criminal, or violent. Sadly, law enforcement and the public have all suffered when poor officer-youth interactions were fuel for media frenzy and rioting (along with expensive court cases or settlements). In an article published in 2009, two researchers examining troubling youth-police relations in poor St. Louis, Missouri, neighborhoods all but predicted the Ferguson riots of 2015.[1]

We Can Learn from Research

Research indicates that many of the underlying problems in officer-youth confrontations could be addressed and possibly prevented by more effective training in community policing strategies that are youth specific. Such strategies include utilizing youth-specific de-escalation techniques, combined with training that explains the scientific, evidence-based differences between youth and adult brain development and functioning.

Youth are not "little adults," and they act and react very differently to adult-based law enforcement techniques. As noted in a 2013 survey of academy training, in 40 U.S. states, officer training related to youth focuses primarily on code and legal issues and provides no communication or psychological skills for officers working with youth.[2] The profession can and should take advantage of the latest research and training to decrease the tension, anger, and even aggression youth display toward law enforcement.

The "Disruptive Youth" Call

There is no sworn officer who has not encountered an angry, frustrated, potentially aggressive, or aggressive youth. For school resource officers (SROs) and officers who deal with gangs, it is part of the daily grind, and officers in those specialized units have advanced training available to assist them with such youth. The vast majority of patrol officers who also encounter such youth are left in the dark.

Statistics on fraught police-youth encounters are few and far between as the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program does not track encounters or even incidents, no matter how troubling or frequent they may be. Yet, ask officers, even those with only a few months of time on the street, how often they encounter a troubled youth and the anecdotal quantitative data add up quickly. More importantly, the nature of many youth called to an officer's attention can often be described as volatile, mouthy, rude, challenging, and combative.

UCR data from 2011 indicate there were approximately 1,470,000 youth arrests, which amounted to approximately 12 percent of all arrests made that year.[3] While violent crime cases filed against youth have decreased since the late 1990s, delinquency cases involving disorderly youth increased by 108 percent from 1985 through 2009.[4] This trend corresponds to roughly the same time period in which SROs and zero tolerance policies became commonplace in the United States.

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A Historical Training Problem

Given the frequency and volatility of police encounters with today's youth, it is astonishing that basic training in almost every state is devoid of youth-specific de-escalation training and instruction about the developmental differences between youth and adults. The consequences of treating youth as little adults have been both tragic and expensive for all involved.

How is it that law enforcement has failed to address this serious gap in training that leaves officers without critical knowledge, education, and experience with a population they encounter on a regular basis?

How can it be that standard training fails to provide officers with information available to almost every other branch of human services professionals who deal with obnoxious and aggressive youth on a daily basis? Training officers on the dramatic differences between adult and youth brains and the unique emotional and developmental competencies of youth could improve the effectiveness and safety of both officers and youth during encounters. Given the persistence of youth crime, the need for improved training would appear obvious.

In fact, calls for such training are not new. The IACP has called for such strategies at least three times over the last 20 years.[5] Calls have also come from OJJDP, academia, attorneys, parents, and communities for law enforcement training on de-escalating youth aggression, retraining of officers on how to approach potentially violent youth confrontations in a safer and more effective manner, and to treat youth violence as a public health issue. IACP's 2014 summit report, *Law Enforcement's Leadership Role in Juvenile Justice Reform*, noted that the lack of developmentally appropriate interaction training was a missed opportunity to change the way officers respond to and interact with youth. Failure to offer such effective training can have a snowball effect.[6]

When officers do not have the training or tools to effectively de-escalate police-youth encounters, they can rely only upon what they do have—adult-based techniques. The effect of using verbal and physical control techniques designed for use on adults upon youth is like throwing gasoline on a fire. Pain escalates youth anger and aggression because the youth brain relies more upon parts that respond emotionally, which triggers a fight-or-flight reaction.

As seen on countless YouTube videos of youth encounters with officers, pain combined with repeating the same commands 16 times in an increasingly loud and frustrated voice are often ineffective. Officer frustration increases along with youth pain and frustration. The increased use of force on a youth can cascade from injury to parental complaints to media attention and even lawsuits. Such incidents result in decreased respect for law enforcement and cooperation from other youth and the community.

Research Predicts Reality

Academic literature traces this recent history of poor officer-youth interaction to the civil unrest of the 1960s and has documented it worsening over time.[7] Not surprisingly, youth from poor and minority communities have the worst perceptions of officers, and, sometimes, the research shows officers' attitudes mirror that perception. Officer actions and reactions toward youth increased in distressed neighborhoods where officers were quicker to arrest youth.[8]

When encounters with angry or aggressive youth are not well documented by officers, important information is lost, and an opportunity to learn and increase everyone's safety is missed. Where the youth's behavior escalates over time due to ineffective intervention, repeated officer involvement increases the likelihood of use of force. An officer's inability to de-escalate youth aggression in an initial encounter is likely to lead to future incidents and a predictable increase in problematic and even violent behavior.

In a somewhat prophetic comment on how damaging the lack of appropriate law enforcement training relating to disruptive youth could be, one researcher referred to the 1968 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* and foresaw that youth congregating in the streets are the ones likely to explode and even riot if they encounter hostility and disrespect from law enforcement.[9] It is at precisely those times that officers will find it most important to understand how to quickly, safely, and effectively diffuse such attitudes and anger before it flares into dangerous behavior.

Forty-one years later, in 2009, a study sought the opinions of black and white youth from three disadvantaged St. Louis, Missouri, neighborhoods. What youth think of officers is critical to determine how law enforcement can more effectively work with and address problems presented by those youth. The youth studied held firm convictions that they were regularly disrespected and mistreated during contacts, and that such actions resulted in increased negative attitudes and behaviors by both youth and officers during subsequent contacts.[10]

Only five years after Brunson and Weitzer published their study of youth attitudes toward police in poor minority neighborhoods in St. Louis, a nearby neighborhood called Ferguson erupted into violence and history. At the heart of the conflict was the perception of law enforcement's treatment of citizens, particularly minority youth.

Time to Retool Our Training

Can training received by youth care workers in residential treatment facilities, youth correctional officers, probation and parole officers, and judges and attorneys in the juvenile justice system be a resource for law enforcement? All of those professions have developed research-based training that encompasses youth brain development, emotional development and the basis for youth impulsivity, defiance of authority, and emotional responses to stressors and pressure, but such training is not designed for the unique nature of law enforcement.

As youths' demeanor appears to play a major role in officers' actions and reactions, it is logical that understanding negative attitudes toward all authority, and law enforcement in particular, would be of importance to avoid escalating a police-youth encounter. How a youth perceives authoritative actions and reactions, including perceptions about respect, trust, hostility, meaningful communication, and potential punishment, are all part of youth psychology that is both learnable and practical. Stated differently, officers need to learn how and why youth become angry and aggressive, and they need to learn how their own actions and responses may fuel that anger and aggression.

One negative encounter with police can quickly reverberate throughout a school, a neighborhood, and a community. The opposite is equally true. One unexpected positive encounter can change an incident into an opportunity and quickly reframe an attitude. Given the prevalence of social media use by youth, a good encounter could go as viral as a bad one.

While community policing provides a framework that can improve police-youth interactions and can help develop a rapport and style of interaction with youth in general, such goodwill can be sustained only if all officers are trained in how to turn a negative incident into a positive encounter. Without research-based law enforcement training on why and how youth become angry and how to quickly and safely lessen that anger, officers lack proven tools that quickly, safely, and effectively diffuse youth anger and prevent incidents from escalating.

A recommended outline of such a curriculum would include training on the following topics:

- youth development, including physical, psychological, and social factors that promote positive interactions between youth and authority figures;
- youth brain and emotional development and how to effectively work within those constraints;
- recognition and acknowledgement of possible causes for problematic behavior;
- trauma and traumatized responses to law enforcement by youth and how to avoid them;
- recognition of learning disabilities in youth and how to work around them;
- demographic and cultural factors that may influence youth aggression and how to address them respectfully;
- asserting authority constructively so that it is accepted and reduces the potential for use of force; and
- youth-specific mental and verbal de-escalation skills and, where necessary, painless physical restraints that do not escalate encounters through the use of pain compliance techniques.

Training academies that offer reasons to not devote the time to such subjects should also consider the legal and social costs of failing to do so. Failure to train and excessive use-of-force lawsuits are neither cheap nor uncommon, and the situation is being fueled by media-hyped incidents portraying law enforcement as a whole in a negative light. Combined with the growing trend of courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, to give credibility to scientific evidence relating to youth brain and psychological development, it may be only a matter of time before legislatures or courts force such training upon agencies as a result of their ignoring a proven need for it.

Officers are more educated now than at any other time in the history of U.S. law enforcement. There is no reason why youth-specific training cannot include the latest scientific findings on adolescent brain development, neuroscience, psychology, and sociology or incorporate aspects of developmental competence into basic training. Failure to do so deprives officers of information and tools critical to their safety.

Officers trained in youth developmental stages would understand that youth see, hear, process, and respond to situations differently than adults and are sometimes incapable of performing the commands officers give to adults. Officers who are competently trained in youth development can set achievable expectations for youth and guide them into appropriate responses and safer interactions. The concept and practice of developmental competence by officers becomes even more important when one considers how quickly a bad attitude can escalate into a confrontation or even lead to the use of deadly force in an attempt to control an angry or aggressive youth when the situation might have been handled by de-escalation.

Training Can Improve Youth Encounters

A smarter way of training officers to work effectively with youth is to learn the skill of supportive control. Control resides on a continuum and supportive control helps a youth see, hear, and understand that the officer is supporting a smart and safe decision. Directed control always remains an option, if necessary.

Armed with an understanding that control of angry youth is not only possible but likely if supportive control and youth-specific de-escalation techniques are used, an officer can act both smarter and safer. Speaking and acting in a firm, yet supportive manner can get an angry youth to follow directions without verbal or physical escalation. The win-win scenario is both possible and probable with the proper tools and training.

Most angry or aggressive youth will acknowledge that a trained officer can outfight them and certainly carries tools to hurt them. Yet, nearly every other human service professional that will deal with that same youth will not have an officer's tools and authority and will wisely avoid a potential fight by using mental and verbal de-escalation tools. They will out-think and out-talk a youth so as to not have to outfight him or her. Refocusing officer training with youth to employ smarter tools will result in fewer escalated encounters, fewer injuries, and fewer YouTube videos portraying officers as aggressors instead of protectors.

Community policing is at the heart of retooling officer training to more effectively communicate and work with youth. Youth, and arguably the most troubled of them, are at the heart of community policing. How police treat the youth of a community reverberates throughout the entire community.

If the community perceives law enforcement's actions as fair and supportive of peace and order, then it wins the community's mind and heart. If officers' words and actions are perceived as bullying, threatening, and disrespectful, even to the most troubled of youth, then they lose the support of the community. Both effects played out in the recent Baltimore, Maryland, riots where youth taunted and stoned officers one day and the community (youth and adults) turned out to form a protective line for officers the next day.

To communicate and work effectively with youth, it is essential that officers frequently and positively interact with them in their neighborhoods and schools. This could be through participation in planned activities or through friendly conversation while walking in places youth congregate. Every youth interaction should be seen as an opportunity to establish a positive interaction and even a relationship. Every new young face is a potential Explorer recruit. If youth truly are in an enormous learning phase of their lives, then there should be no better role model for them to learn from than an officer.

As incidents with youth are often being recorded on another youth's cellphone camera, keep in mind that the value of a positive, virally Tweeted encounter is worth its weight in gold for all officers. The most effective officers who work with youth are those who understand the importance of continuous, open, nonjudgmental communication and positive attitudes toward all youth, even the most annoying and troubled. The payoff will come during an otherwise angry encounter.

Just as crisis intervention team (CIT) training has breached the barrier to law enforcement effectively dealing with persons with mental illness, youth-specific de-escalation and developmental competency training for officers can breach the barrier to law enforcement working effectively with angry and aggressive youth. The percentage of officer contacts with youth likely far exceeds the percentage of contacts with adults with mental illness, which are estimated at between 7 and 15 percent.[11]

For everyone's safety and welfare, law enforcement must reclaim its credibility with all youth by retooling its basic and continuing education to include youth-specific

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communication and de-escalation skills. Law enforcement cannot fight its way out of its current reputation with youth and their communities. Officers can, however, learn smarter and safer ways to engage and supportively control troubled, angry, or aggressive youth. The adage "if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got" is fitting. The officer who communicates trust will earn respect while in uniform. Once upon a time is now. ❖

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Notes:

[1]Rod K. Brunson and Ronald Weitzer, "Police Relations with Black and White Youths in Different Urban Neighborhoods," *Urban Affairs Review* 44, no. 6 (July 2009): 858–885, http://www.academia.edu/9853428/Police_and_Black_Residents_of_St._Louis_Missouri (accessed September 30, 2014).

[2]Lisa H. Thurau, *If Not Now, When? A Survey of Juvenile Justice Training in America's Police Academies* (Cambridge, MA: Strategies for Youth, February 2013), http://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/SFYReport_02-2013_rev.pdf.

[3]Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the United States 2011," table 38: Arrests by Age, 2011, https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/tables/table-38 (accessed September 30, 2015).

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[6]IACP, *Law Enforcement's Leadership Role in Juvenile Justice Reform*.

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[8]Stephanie Meyers, *Police Encounters with Juvenile Suspects: Explaining the Use of Authority and Provision of Support*, http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/html/cd_rom/resources_law_enf/pubs/PoliceEncounterswithJuvenileSuspectsExplainingtheUseofAuthority.pdf.

[9]Janeksela, "Juvenile Attitudes toward the Police."

[10]Brunson and Weitzer, "Police Relations with Black and White Youths in Different Urban Neighborhoods."

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