

An avoidable murder: Better training for policing teenagers

BY LISA H. THURAU AND DANIEL POLLACK, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 09/07/18 01:30 PM EDT
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF *THE HILL*



© Getty Images

Last week, a Dallas County jury sentenced former police officer Roy Oliver to 15 years in prison for murdering 15-year-old Jordan Edwards. Oliver shot Edwards in the head while he was in a car with several other teenagers. Edwards might not have lost his life if Oliver had been better trained in the unique aspects of policing teens.

Police receive training in many specialty areas: crime scene preservation, criminal investigations, digital technology crime, fire-related crimes, hostage-taking, interviewing, school-related crime, domestic terrorism, undercover survival techniques, etc. But one kind of training is not offered often or widely enough — training for law enforcement officials regarding how exactly to deal with juveniles.

In 2018, it's rare that officers are trained how to interact effectively with youths. Indeed, a 2013 study of how many police recruits received training on how to interact with youths found that only six hours, or about 1 percent of basic training in police academies, was spent on juvenile justice issues. And most of that time was devoted to the legal issues surrounding youth custody, transport and detention.

Five states offer no specific police training focused on juveniles. Only Connecticut and Illinois report providing new officers training on adolescent development and psychology. Few do any training on how law enforcement must address youths' mental health issues. A survey of police

chiefs in 2011 by the International Association of Chiefs of Police found there was no in-service training for officers either — none was mandated and none was funded, so none was offered. These are remarkable oversights in view of the fact that the National Institute of Mental Health suggests that about one of every five youths has a diagnosable mental health issue. Adolescence typically is the age of onset for mental illness.

Even fewer police academies take to heart the federal obligation that states should address disproportionate minority contact, which is at its peak at the point of arrest. This helps explain why disparities in treatment of youths of color is so stubbornly unchangeable.

Adolescents are a breed apart. They perceive, process and respond differently because their brains are going through seismic changes. They overreact, under-react, have difficulty foreseeing danger, ignore consequences, and test the laws of their country and their parents' patience.

This is why developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and racially equitable training is necessary. But too many law enforcement officials remain stubbornly resistant to this notion, often to their own harm and legal exposure.

The absence of training causes jarring and violent results that all too often make headlines. States are nowhere to be seen on this horizon. A 2017 survey of state laws, regulations and law enforcement commissions found not a single set of model policies regarding comprehensive interaction training for youths. A Strategies for Youth survey of standards conducted between 2014 to 2016, including the combination of policy and practice that guide responses of law enforcement officers, found that state

agencies have virtually no role in setting standards for police interactions with youths. Rather, standards of practice for police officers and other law enforcement officials almost always are developed solely by local law enforcement agencies.

We often focus on making good policing of youths a priority only when there has been a “problem” — an avoidable problem.

Justifiably or not, too many people perceive police as biased, impetuous, unethical, or inefficient in their protection responsibilities, especially of teenagers. The ever-changing political, racial, and overall sociological climate are the backdrop for these perceptions — not easily fixable. What we can do is provide police with training specifically geared toward working with teenagers.

Policing teenagers isn't easy. But they're worth it.

Lisa H. Thureau is CEO and executive director of Strategies for Youth, a policy and training organization dedicated to improving police-youth interactions through community engagement, police training and outreach programs for youth. Contact: lht@strategiesforyouth.org

Daniel Pollack, M.S.S.A. (M.S.W.), Esq., is Professor in the School of Social Work at Yeshiva University. He has been retained as an expert witness in more than 25 states. Case subject matter includes child abuse and neglect, and abuse and wrongful death of children in foster care, residential care, and day care. He was recently appointed to “Game Over: Commission to Protect Youth Athletes,” an independent Blue Ribbon Commission. Contact: dpollack@yu.edu