



## **Frequently asked questions about The Force Report**

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You've got questions. We've got answers.

The Force Report, a 16-month investigation by NJ Advance Media, found New Jersey's system for tracking police force is broken, with no statewide collection or analysis of data, little oversight by state officials and no standard practices among local departments.

Two decades ago, officials envisioned a centralized database that potentially would flag dangerous cops for scrutiny. But that database was never created.

So we built it.

In an unprecedented undertaking, the news organization filed 506 public records requests and collected 72,607 use-of-force forms covering 2012 through 2016. The results are now available at [nj.com/force](http://nj.com/force), the most comprehensive statewide database of police force in the United States.

Here is a list of the most commonly asked questions about this project:

### **Q: What is police use of force?**

A: Perhaps the single greatest power granted a police officer is the legal authority to use force against another person. It is a normal part of policing, whether it's twisting someone's arm behind their back or firing a gun. You can find an explanation of every type of force [here](#).

### **Q. Is "force" the same thing as "excessive force"?**

A. No. Using force is a normal and necessary part of policing to protect both the public and the officer. But experts agree it should be closely monitored in order to intervene with officers who may be pushing the boundaries of what's acceptable or who are being outright excessive.

### **Q. Is this a database of bad officers?**

A. Most definitely not. This is a database of police use of force. Analyzing use-of-force statistics can identify departments or individual officers who are significant outliers compared to state averages, providing a basis for additional review, scrutiny and, if necessary, intervention.

**Q. If an officer or department uses force a lot, does that mean they're up to no good?**

A. No, although they might deserve a closer look. That's the whole idea of an early warning system. Is there a particular reason they might be using more force, or are their officers simply more aggressive than others? What kind of intervention might address the issue? Or maybe they're just better about filling out their forms than others.

**Q. What is a use-of-force form?**

A. Guidelines established by the state Attorney General's Office in 2001 require officers who use force to fill out a special form explaining what they did, why they did it and to whom they did it, among other things. The forms were intended to be part of an oversight system.

**Q. So all of these forms feed a big state database to help improve policing in N.J.?**

A. No. While a central system for reporting and data analysis was envisioned by state officials who established the reporting requirement, it never happened. Most forms end up as paper records in filing cabinets, making it impossible for department or statewide analysis.

**Q. Why do I care?**

A. Using force can inflict significant and lasting harm on a person. A failure to properly oversee police use of force can result in overly aggressive officers unnecessarily injuring or killing people. Besides the human toll, such actions can cost taxpayers a lot of money in lawsuits.

**Q. Why do this investigation now?**

A. Reporters for years have attempted to quantify and analyze police use of force, but departments would redact portions of the forms or refuse to release them. That all changed last year when the state Supreme Court ruled that, in nearly all cases, the forms must be made public. The process of collecting data for this investigation began immediately after the court ruling.

**Q. Why did you choose the years 2012 through 2016?**

A. We initially sought 10 years of data, from 2007 through 2016. However, departments made it clear they would have trouble providing many older records. We then reduced our requests to the five-year period of 2012 through 2016, the most recently completed full year available.

**Q. How did you get all of the forms?**

A. We submitted 506 public records requests covering every New Jersey municipal police department and the State Police for a five-year period, from 2012 through 2016. They handed over 72,607 forms. Naturally, it took a while. Read more about our public records requests.

**Q. How did you take all these paper records and make a searchable database?**

A. It took a lot of hard work and a good bit of money. Read more about the nitty-gritty of our data input, cleaning and analysis.

**Q. How did you standardize millions of data points within an acceptable error rate?**

A. Seriously great question, and you're ready to graduate to our full methodology.

**Q. What's the difference between total uses of force and total force incidents?**

A. In our analysis, it was important to distinguish between total uses of force and total force incidents. For example, three officers may use force as part of a single arrest. That would result in three use-of-force forms, but we only count that as one force incident. Force incidents are a fairer way of analyzing how often a department uses force compared to others.

**Q. Is this database perfect?**

A. No. These forms were created by humans and filled out by humans, and everyone is prone to making mistakes. Some forms may be incomplete, inaccurate or missing altogether. NJ Advance Media cannot vouch for the accuracy of each individual form provided by departments.

**Q. Can I search for my police department or for a specific officer?**

A. Absolutely. Enter the name into the search bar here to check out loads of statistics, and to compare your department or neighborhood officers to those in the rest of the state.

**Q. Oh boy, this is a lot of information. Can you just summarize your findings for me?**

A. Your wish? Our command.

**Q. Why does searching for my police department load data for the State Police?**

A. This means your town is patrolled by the State Police, and therefore localized statistics won't be unavailable. Instead, we have provided the State Police force overview.

**Q. Why does the officer I searched not appear in the database?**

A. If an officer did not use force or fill out a use-of-force form from 2012 through 2016, their names do not appear in this database.

**Q. What didn't you include in the database?**

A. Data on Tasers, K-9s, people under the influence and hospitalizations were not included because of limited or highly inconsistent reporting by departments. You can read more about how the database was constructed in our full methodology.

**Q. Why can't I see the actual use-of-force forms?**

A. The forms contain personal information about people such as where an incident took place. Some also pertain to domestic violence victims or juveniles. We have withheld the full forms to protect individual privacy. If you're interested in a particular incident or department, you can file an open records request and cite our project.

**Q. Can I download the data?**

A. Yes. You can download aggregate data for every local police department. Or you can sign up to be notified when the full dataset will be available.

**Q. Your database is missing an officer or incident that I know exists. Where is it?**

A. We've found several instances in which forms were not provided under our records requests, were missing, or were never completed. If you're aware of an incident that occurred from 2012 through 2016 but is not included, please email us at [forcereport@njadvancemedia.com](mailto:forcereport@njadvancemedia.com).

**Q. If I spot an error or want to pass along a tip, what do I do?**

A. This is a living, breathing database, and we're always working to make it better. If you spot a problem or have a story you suggest we pursue, email us at [forcereport@njadvancemedia.com](mailto:forcereport@njadvancemedia.com).

*The Force Report is a continuing investigation of police use of force in New Jersey. Read more from the series or search your local police department and officers in the full the database.*