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N.J. releases data showing every time cops hit, tackled or shot suspects on groundbreaking new website

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New Jersey authorities on Tuesday unveiled a trove of data on every use of physical force by officers statewide, providing a level of detail law enforcement leaders said isn't available anywhere else in the country.

The interactive portal shows every time cops hit, tackled or shot suspects in recent months, and the data is both viewable online and downloadable.

The tool was modeled after The Force Report, a 2018 NJ Advance Media investigation that found glaring problems in how officers used force, ranging from racial disparities to officers with high use-of-force rates — including one cop who later faced criminal assault charges.

“We are committed to making New Jersey a national leader on policing reform, and our Use of Force Dashboard is a central piece of that effort,” state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement Tuesday.

Force can range from twisting a suspect's arm to firing a gun and is a normal and necessary part of policing, but some of the numbers are already raising questions.

Since late last year, police reported using force on Black people 2,434 times. That number is higher than any other racial group and amounts to more than 44% of all force, despite Black residents making up less than a fifth of the total population.

Furthermore, cops labeled more than a fifth of all reported force encounters as a “potential mental health incident.” Those 1,192 interactions cast in stark relief the debate over when and how police should intervene when someone is experiencing a crisis.

Tuesday's release was the culmination of more than two years worth of work overseen by the state attorney general's office.

NJ Advance Media built The Force Report using tens of thousands of use-of-force forms, some largely hidden from public view, and Grewal and police leaders acknowledged at the time that they had failed to keep an accurate accounting of how officers use force.

However, some police chiefs and union leaders criticized the investigation on the grounds that some departments used different standards on when to report force.

Since Oct. 1, officers have used the same online form to document every violent encounter. Officials have said the new data will offer fairer comparisons between cops and cities.

“We were kind of all over the place as law enforcement agencies,” Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police, said at a news conference in December. “With this new portal ... we’ll actually be analyzing and comparing apples to apples.”

The database currently covers five months, through the end of February.

Residents can explore a wide range of information, including why cops believed force was necessary to whether suspects appeared drunk. (If the website asks for a username, just click “guest.”)

Officer names are included, but the names of people who had force used on them are not. The location of an incident is also omitted in order to protect people’s privacy, according to attorney general spokesman Steven Barnes.

The portal is still a work in progress — officials described Tuesday’s release as a “beta” phase — and residents can offer suggestions by emailing “beta@njoag.gov” or through the attorney general’s website.

The state has a few examples to follow.

The New York Police Department publishes general force trends, and California lets residents view statistics for specific departments. The FBI began collecting nationwide data in 2019, although departments don’t have to disclose numbers.

Yet other states generally only provide summaries of how officers use force, experts said.

New Jersey’s portal “is the first one I’ve heard of that has such a degree of granularity,” Bill Johnson, executive director of the National Association of Police Organizations, wrote in an email.

In December, officials also announced new rules for when officers may use force, the first overhaul of the policy in decades.

Cops generally must fill out a use-of-force form within 24 hours of an incident, although the portal will not be updated that quickly.

Those rules also apply to corrections officers, but the portal does not include force used in prisons.