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Less than 1% of N.J. cops accounted for 18% of every kick, hit and tackle across N.J., new data shows

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New Jersey launched a groundbreaking website this month detailing every time officers recently hit, restrained or shot somebody, and the data provides the most up-to-date snapshot ever available of how local police use physical force.

Officials are still fixing small glitches and hope to eventually update the database monthly.

But the numbers, which cover October through February, already point to a few trends.

Most cops didn't use any force. A few used a lot.

A small number of officers reported using more force than the vast majority of their colleagues.

Just 289 cops used force at least three times in five months, a higher rate than others. Some said they used far more.

Less than 4,000 reported using force at all, out of nearly 38,100 active law enforcement officers statewide as of 2019, the most recent year available, according to an attorney general spokesman.

Said another way, less than 1% of New Jersey officers accounted for 18% of all reported force.

Experts said it was normal for some officers to use more force than others.

“Not all police officers are in a position to almost ever make arrests,” said Wayne Fisher, a former Newark cop and a senior policy adviser with Rutgers University’s Center on Policing. “Cops have desk jobs, they’re not having calls for service, they’re not on the front line.”

Officers may also have a more dangerous patrol than their colleagues, and there is not enough information in the database to know if any incidents were excessive.

But the numbers could help police chiefs flag whether someone is overly aggressive. Starting at the end of the year, new rules will require at least two supervisors review every incident.

The data “should be pretty significant to the early warning systems,” said Dennis Kenney, a former Florida officer and professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. Supervisor review will also help guard against officers falsifying reports, Kenney said.

Furthermore, the amount of force reported during these five months seemed low overall, said Maria Haberfeld, another professor at John Jay who also served in the Israel Defense Forces. The pandemic lockdown may have decreased interactions, meaning numbers could increase, she said.

Hundreds of people were hospitalized, including cops.

Violent encounters can be dangerous for everyone.

More than 600 people who had force used on them were injured in some way, according to the data, including more than 300 who were later hospitalized. That’s about a tenth of the total.

It’s possible the true number is higher.

The data notes that some people were already injured when cops arrived. Since it’s not clear if those subjects were injured further by officers, they’re not counted here.

Cops were also hurt.

Just under 500 officers reported an injury. Nearly 150 reported going to the hospital.

Hospitalization numbers will be especially helpful to watch.

NJ Advance Media largely did not include that information in The Force Report, a police force database that covered 2012 through 2016, because departments didn’t consistently report hospitalizations at that time.

All cops now use the same online form to report incidents.

In addition, when multiple officers used force on the same person, their reports sometimes differed. This analysis used the most conservative hospitalization numbers, which is one reason why some information here may be slightly different from how the attorney general’s office calculates the data online.

Black suspects were more likely to run away than whites, who were more likely to fight back.

More than 32% of Black subjects who had force used on them fled, compared to almost 25% of white subjects.

At the same time, less than 32% of Black subjects were reported to show “aggressive resistance,” while almost 38% of whites did.

This is similar to data from a recent five-year period, when police also reported that white suspects were more likely to threaten or attack officers, while Black suspects were more likely to flee.

“I’m not terribly surprised that they would be more inclined to run” considering “the attention given to the numbers of people shot,” said Kenney, one of the John Jay professors. “I would be.”

Black people are over-represented in the new data. Officers reported using force on Black people more than 2,430 times in recent months, amounting to more than 44% of all force, despite Black residents making up less than 20% of the total population.

It’s not yet known how these numbers compare to arrests, because arrest data has not yet been published. That comparison will be a better barometer to test if officers are disproportionately using force on Black suspects, said Fisher, at Rutgers.

With more data, it will also be possible to take a closer look at how racial groups are affected town by town. Haberfeld added that the racial disparities were probably driven by just a few cities.

Experts agreed having every officer use the same use-of-force form in the same database could unquestionably help catch problems, although they cautioned that training and oversight will be just as important.