Police Killings of People With Mental Illness Prompt Talk of Reform

Policies could mandate training on how officers should interact with people experiencing a mental health crisis.

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In response to several recent police killings of people with mental health issues, at least eight states may implement policies mandating that officers receive additional training on how to safely and effectively interact with individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. Those states include Utah, New York and California, reports The Associated Press.

However, advocates suggest that the proposed legislation is misguided. Law enforcement, they say, is neither equipped nor designed to address such situations. “The solution that would have the most impact on the problem is to prevent people with mental illness from encountering law enforcement in the first place,” Elizabeth Sinclair Hancq, who coauthored a 2015 report on the subject, told the AP.

This problem, which represents another facet of the debate over police brutality and racial profiling, was thrust into the national spotlight in March 2020, when Daniel Prude, a Black man experiencing a PCP-induced psychotic episode (PCP is a psychedelic drug also known as angel dust), died after Rochester, New York, officers put a hood over his head and pinned him to the ground.

In September 2020, Salt Lake City police severely wounded Linden Cameron, a 13-year-old boy with Asperger’s syndrome, after he fled from officers. In October 2020, Walter Wallace, a Black man who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was shot by Philadelphia officers after he allegedly ignored their requests to drop a knife. In December 2020, Angelo Quinto, a Filipino immigrant who struggled with anxiety and depression and was experiencing paranoia, passed away three days after two Antioch, California, officers allegedly knelt on his neck in an attempt to subdue him. (The incident inspired comparisons to the George Floyd case.)

These tragedies sparked another wave of calls for police reform. In January, New York politicians proposed legislation that would require officers to complete a minimum of 32 credit hours of training on de-escalation techniques, among other topics. On February 11, California Senator Anthony J. Portantino (D–La Canada Flintridge) introduced a bill that would require officers to take college courses on mental health, social services and psychology. In March, Utah Republican

Governor Spencer Cox passed a law that will help standardize police crisis intervention training throughout the state.

Some experts doubt that these proposed solutions will reduce the incidence of fatal confrontations, especially since 34 states have already enacted similar laws. Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Washington, DC–based think tank Police Executive Research Forum, told the AP that most police training is outdated and ineffective.

“The training that police have received for the past, I’d say, 25 years has not changed significantly, and it’s out of date, and it doesn’t meet today’s realities,” Wexler said. “I mean, the last thing a mother wants when they call the police is for an officer to use force. Especially in a situation that didn’t call for it because the officers weren’t trained in how to recognize a crisis.”

According to The Hill, in addition to legislators in Utah, New York and California, those in Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania and North Carolina are also pressing for police reform.

For more on Black Americans, police violence and mental health, read “Black People’s Mental Health Is Under Siege” and “Racism Is Morally Reprehensible. Does It Also Pose Health Risks?”

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