GUEST ESSAY

What Do Police Know About Teenagers? Not Enough.

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By Meryl Davids Landau
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The day Brian Lowe attended a training session for police officers on understanding the minds of teenagers, he knew his job would never be the same.

Mr. Lowe, a lieutenant in the sheriff's office in Tippecanoe County, Ind., immediately recalled encounters with young people in the past — the teens he'd handcuffed for trespassing in a closed park in the middle of the night while hanging out with friends, the students he'd arrested for stealing a cafeteria sandwich. Like most police officers across the country, he had been taught to act as an enforcer, with the idea that teenagers should not get away with anything an adult would not.

But in the training session, "Policing the Teen Brain," Mr. Lowe learned all the ways that adolescents are different from adults. For instance, because of their less-developed prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain charged with problem solving and controlling irrational behavior — and the coursing hormones of puberty, they are not always in command of their actions. Children who have suffered violence or other trauma are even more likely to become emotionally unstable under stress.

Most police never learn this. "In the police academy, I didn't have one minute of training on how to deal with youth," Mr. Lowe said.

According to Dr. Matthew Aalsma, a psychologist and an instructor in the program, when police officers interact with teens, they tend to assume that the teen will be brash and disrespectful and will likely react emotionally. He said the program teaches police officers that "this is actually developmentally appropriate behavior."

Tippecanoe County, which includes Lafayette and West Lafayette and houses Purdue University, has run nearly all of its 400 officers through the training in the past eight years, including resource officers based in schools. (Mr. Lowe took the class in late 2013, and he now teaches others.) An additional 60 people from other county departments have also taken the course.

It has been the flagship of Tippecanoe's larger effort aimed at keeping kids out of juvenile detention, which is closer to jail than adults realize. In addition to the training for police officers, the county offers teenagers anger management classes, substance abuse counseling, mental health care and other services, most of which are free.

Tippecanoe undertook these efforts in 2013 after closely analyzing its youth arrest rates as part of its involvement in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, said Rebecca Humphrey, the county's executive director of youth services. The county discovered that 44 percent of 12-to-18-year-olds in the community who were detained faced crimes like resisting arrest, without being charged with any underlying offenses. In a typical scenario, she explained, an officer would be called to a scene and see teenagers nearby, command them to come to him and then react when one or more of them would run. "The officer chases the kids and gets them in the back of the squad car, but this had nothing to do with the reason the officer was called to the scene," she said.

Scott Angstadt, the chief deputy probation officer overseeing Tippecanoe's juvenile division, summed up the county's more recent philosophy: "We need to focus on detaining the right kids at the right time for the right reasons. Rather than the kid who made us mad, we want to detain the kid who is dangerous to the community."

The results of Tippecanoe's efforts have been dramatic. In 2010, 334 teenagers in the county were admitted to a secure detention facility, according to Ms. Humphrey. By 2019, that number had fallen by 71 percent, to 98. (The number fell even more in 2020, but Covid-19 lockdowns likely played a role.)

Unnecessarily provocative encounters between police and youth are common in the United States, said Lisa Thurau, the founder and executive director of the nonprofit Strategies for Youth in Cambridge, Mass., which created the training program. These encounters can result in arrests, which disproportionately affect young people of color nationwide. A report in 2014 by the Sentencing Project, an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., concluded that Black youth are twice as likely as white youth to be arrested.

According to the Department of Justice, tens of thousands of teenagers are arrested each year for the vague crime of disorderly conduct. And 42 percent of them are Black.

Strategies for Youth has conducted training sessions in 21 states, including for police departments in Albany and Newburgh, N.Y. Some jurisdictions have seen results as impactful as Tippecanoe's: Juvenile arrests in Charlottesville, Va., dropped 59 percent. In Cambridge, Mass., arrests for minor offenses plunged 70 percent, according to Ms. Thurau.

Still, many police departments that have contacted Strategies for Youth have balked at the price: $21,500 for a two-day training session and nearly $35,000 for a four-day train-the-trainer program so police departments can do their own training. The cost is especially challenging at a time when cities are strapped for funds. But the alternative, putting kids in detention who don't need to be there, is costly, too. It is about $140 a day in Tippecanoe, Ms. Humphrey said.

Even more important, unnecessary detentions have serious consequences, Ms. Thurau said. Kids in detention miss school, which can impede their ability to graduate. Having a record "can affect a kid's ability to get a job or go to college," she said. Being taken from a home may cause trauma to the teenager and the teenager's family. And the financial costs of court fees and lawyers may be hard for a family to bear.

Tippecanoe County also offers "Parenting the Teen Brain" for parents, so they can better understand their child's actions and avoid unnecessary calls to the police.

Although Tippecanoe's population is 83 percent white, these programs especially benefit its growing community of children of color, Mr. Angstadt said, because they are overrepresented in the county's juvenile justice system. Thus far, though, white teens in the county have benefited more, with a 58 percent drop in secure detention for white youth, compared with a 36 percent dip for Black youth. Ms. Humphrey said the county is examining possible reasons.

During the training, officers learn techniques like waiting for teenagers to calm down before trying to talk to them, then listening carefully and mirroring their words so they know they've been heard. "A lot of kids are intimidated by the uniform. If you establish a relationship, you will have a much bigger impact," said Aaron Gilman, a deputy and school resource officer in the Tippecanoe school district, who leads parts of the training.

These made a difference to Mara England, a 19-year-old living in Lafayette. When she was 14 to 17 years old, police were called to her family's home several times after she got into physical altercations with a relative. She suffers from mental illness, including intermittent explosive disorder, she said. The officers "would take the time to talk to me and keep me calm until I de-escalated," she said. She has since gotten help for her mental health issues, and she currently assists other troubled youth.

Not every teen has benefited from the training. Jewel DeRamus, who in 2014 moved to Lafayette from Chicago with her six boys, said that last year one of her teenage sons was arrested by an officer who didn't take the boy's learning and emotional disabilities into account during their volatile interaction.

But Faith Graham, a judge of the county's juvenile court, said that overall, she has been pleased. Kids who are a danger to themselves or others are still arrested. But many of the unnecessary detentions are gone. A police officer's "approach to a kid can change the whole interaction," she said. Whether the officer comes to it with fighting gloves or kid gloves can profoundly affect the teenager's life.

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