Opinion: Not everybody is an expert on policing

By Maki Haberfeld

Nowadays, everybody—agenda-driven politicians, entertainment moguls, and many citizens on the streets —is considered an expert on what needs to be done to improve policing.

This is not helping policing or our current national conversation. As a former police officer and as author of many books and articles about the police profession, I resent the current rush-to-judgment environment and the ubiquitous pontification about the solutions.

Very few academics who study policing are part of the media conversation. We academics hear public officials quote out-of-context statistics, repeat catch phrases like "community-oriented policing," and fuel the anger. Reputable media outlets often quote the number of people killed by police officers in a given year as an example of police use of force or brutality—even though that figure would include homicidal criminals like Micah Xavier Johnson, the Dallas sniper who killed five officers.

Almost 20 years ago I started teaching a course about police training, and the scarcity of available resources prompted me to write my first book, "Critical Issues in Police Training". Published in 2002 and based on years of fieldwork and research, I identified five main areas that are extremely problematic for policing: recruitment, selection, training, supervision, and discipline.

Fast-forward almost 15 years, and we are talking about the same problems—as if they were new and we still need to study them and create commissions to identify what needs to be done. This is a dangerous waste of time for officers risking their

lives and for communities living in fear of their local precincts. Research is clear: we know quite a lot about what needs to be done—we must transform the way police organizations operate.

It's gratifying to hear so much in the conversation about the need to change how we train police to reduce violent encounters with citizens. But how we recruit and select officers comes first, before training.

For over two decades, research has shown a direct correlation between the emotional maturity of officers and their problem-solving capacity. Yet, as if deliberately ignoring the scientific research finding, most police departments in the United States continue to recruit and select their officers at the very young ages of 19 or 20.

Instead, we should be hiring older officers and putting them through a standardized, mandatory curriculum of training for all our law enforcement agencies. This training must cover a minimum number of hours that will approximate, at the very least, a two-year college degree. Don't we owe it to our communities to give the officers we charge with guarding our lives at least as many hours of training a beauticians and hairdressers? We would not have to invent such standards. We already have the templates, primarily from other countries. Take Finland. The police college there offers bachelor's and master's degrees for its police force. Completed in about three years, the bachelor's degree is composed of 180 credits.

While we have some police departments trying to transform recruitment, selection, and training, we have close to 18,000 different law enforcement agencies in this country, most of them smaller than 50 sworn officers. Teaching de-escalation techniques at the NYPD or the Dallas PD academy did not change the behavior of officers in Louisiana or Minnesota. If we want change nationally, we need to institute a standardized mandate for all.

What is standing in the way of change? On a federal level, a transformation would require revisiting the autonomy of the states to determine their own standards for police forces—the sort of changes politicians don't want to touch. On a local level, sometimes unions oppose raising the standards, local politicians fear they will lose control over hiring, and money for recruitment and training is not a priority.

Yes, many police departments around the country have gotten better at recruitment of ethnic and racial minorities, but diversity is not a stand-in for emotional maturity. Nor does having a department where members of minority communities are in the highest leadership ranks of the police, as in Dallas, change the perception that policing is a profession that is inherently racist and discriminatory in its application of the law.

The promise of this moment is that we can reach the goal that any use of force must be necessary. But to get there, we can't rely on opinions. We need to start with what we actually know about policing. And we need to pray for the right leadership to enable these changes.

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