

FOCUS ON FORCE: Buffalo, Cheektowaga police report drops in the use of force

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Officers using force, sometimes excessive force, has been well-documented over the past year. Specific incidents and eyewitness videos have made Eric Garner and Freddie Gray household names.

It's happening here in Buffalo, too, with video you'll see only on 7 Eyewitness News. It shows a Buffalo Police officer hitting a man with his baton on Chippewa Street. The video was recorded early last Thanksgiving morning.

Now the question now becomes, is use of force on the rise?

Swinging and shouting at a man on the ground, video of Buffalo Police officer Corey Krug is prompting new questions.

7 Eyewitness News reported Ed Drantch asked Buffalo Police Lieutenant Jeff Rinaldo if that video prompted any changes in the department in terms of training or the way force is used. Rinaldo said, "That video in particular has not."

The video is just one of a number of encounters caught on camera over the past year nationwide that have triggered allegations of police crossing the line.

Over the past five months, our Scripps investigative team dug into use of force records from 60 police agencies across the country. Included in the records search was information from Buffalo and Cheektowaga.

"Our reporting requirements for use of force for our officers start at the lowest level of force used," Rinaldo said.

Despite the force used recorded on Chippewa Street, 7 Eyewitness News has found the use of force among Buffalo Police officers has gone down. In 2013, just over 1,400 incidents were reported. In 2014, the number of reports fell to just about 1,000.

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*Use of force can be as mild as an officer simply grabbing your arm.



In Cheektowaga, use of force can range from pepper spray to take downs and Tasers. 7 Eyewitness News has discovered use of force has also gone down there over the past five years.

In 2010, nearly 300 incidents were reported. Five years later, in 2015, fewer than 100 incidents were reported.

Cheektowaga Police Chief Dave Zack says the department's use of Tasers is what raised red flags, despite seemingly low use of the non-deadly force, five years ago.

"We realized that we were training maybe a little bit backward," Zack said. "Maybe not training necessarily the right thing--not when it can be deployed. We want it to be a tool, but we were emphasizing the use of the tool, not emphasizing deescalating the problem initially."

What's happening in Buffalo and Cheektowaga mirrors what's happening elsewhere. 7 Eyewitness News has discovered more than half of the agencies examined in this investigation show use of force actually going down. Just a quarter show use of force on the rise.

"We don't want our officers behaving that way. Our officers don't want to work with other officers who behave in that way," Zack said.

Although both Buffalo and Cheektowaga had similar drops in the use of force, the way each agency reports is drastically different. Buffalo Police answered our information requests with 22-pages of information. Cheektowaga reports with a simple spreadsheet.

"Everyone can do things a little bit differently as far as how they classify their incidents," Lt. Patrick Chuludzinski said.

Chuludzinski himself tracks the use of force among Cheektowaga Police. Police officers self report, using a form where officers have to document everything from the weather to the suspect's condition.

"The more data we can capture on the use of force incidents, the better we can look at it and closely monitor it," Chuludzinski said.

Nationwide, there is no standard for reporting use of force.

"As technology and training evolves on a nationwide scale, obviously in Buffalo we follow those things and we apply them within our own department," Rinaldo said.

The Department of Justice is working toward a uniform system of use of force data collection.

In Cheektowaga, Chief Zack says when there's more accountability, there are fewer incidents.

"When our officers know how closely we look at it, they police themselves better. They also police the officers around them better," Zack said. "We think we're a success story, but you're always one incident away from coming under scrutiny."

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