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EDITOR'S PICK

People of color want more community policing, Wisconsin police poll finds

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In this file photo from February, Madison Police Chief Mike Koval implores recruits to get out of their cars and engage with the community. A recent poll found that people of color want more police in the community, according to the Wisconsin Professional Police Association.

The role of police in communities of color is a hotly contested question nationwide, and Madison has had its fair share of debate. So it may come as a surprise that according to a recent poll from the Wisconsin Professional Police Association, people of color would prefer increased policing in their neighborhoods.

"Some advocates say the minority members don't want law enforcement in their neighborhoods," said Jim Palmer, executive director of the Wisconsin Professional Police Association on a recent episode of "Capital City Sunday." "It's of particular interest to us that the minority members are the ones who want more policing, not less."

But people of color want a specific type of law enforcement, Palmer said: community policing.

This is the fifth year the association has conducted the poll, which also found high favorability ratings of local law enforcement and strong opposition to concealed carry in schools.

The poll found that 58 percent of Wisconsinites want the same level of community policing, while 37 percent want more community policing. But after breaking down the data by race, it was clear that people of color have a stronger preference for increased community policing, Palmer said.

"Minorities, clearly they don't just want more boots on the ground, they want more policing, and they've told us what kind of policing they want. And that's something we should be sensitive to," Palmer said.

"I would say I have specifically heard the same thing from people of color for the last 10 years," said Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, who did not appear on the segment. "Community policing strategies are best practices."

He described a partnership between the community and local law enforcement, referencing his 15-point plan to reduce violence in Chicago as an example. He said preventing crimes was only possible "if police and the community are working collaboratively together."

"Police officers still need to do their job, but why not hire people from the community to work with the police on community policing strategies?" Johnson said. "Our community is so diverse that some would say more police and some would say we need more community policing. I believe we need a hybrid of both."

The poll also found that 84 percent of Wisconsinites believe a well-funded police force improves their quality of life. Looking at approval ratings, 84 percent also said that they approve or strongly approve of how the local police force handles its job.

Palmer said that favorability ratings were high, but "less high amongst non-whites."

The poll also created a test pitting perception versus reality, asking Wisconsinites to name how many people shot in officer-involved shootings in 2016 were armed.

Forty-three percent of respondents said most were armed, and 39 percent said some were armed. In reality, 100 percent were armed.

Neumann said that while that may be the case for 2016, there are several examples of individuals — like Paul Heenan and Tony Robinson — who were unarmed and fatally wounded in previous years.

"There have been incidents we can point to because they've certainly garnered some media attention," Palmer said.

Palmer said that Tony Robinson's death was the only "technically unarmed officer-involved shooting that occurred that year."

"In that case, Mr. Robinson wasn't armed, but in our view, still very dangerous," Palmer said.

Officer-involved shootings continue to rise in Wisconsin. So far in 2017, there have been 14 officer-involved shootings. At this point in 2016, there were 10.

"We're actually up pretty significantly," Palmer said.

Many of those were not in large urban areas, but locations like Wausau, Eau Claire or La Crosse. There have been no officer-involved shootings in Milwaukee this year, which Palmer said is unusual. He called the locations of the shootings "pretty extraordinary."

Asked about the cause of this rise in shootings, Palmer said the reasons were unclear, naming short-staffed police departments, lack of backup and increasingly "brazen" citizens as possible factors.

"It's really hard to pinpoint. And I don't know that we have an explanation," he said. "It's clear that officers face greater threats than they ever have before."

But he said the increased shootings were not due to a "shoot first, ask questions later," mentality, pointing to Wisconsin's training curriculum and its emphasis on de-escalation tactics. He said that in many of this year's officer-involved shootings, the de-escalation tactics were applied first.

Neumann asked about proposed reforms by state Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison, that would change the way officer-involved shootings are investigated and attempt to reduce officer-involved shootings through policy and enhanced training.

While Palmer said the association is always open to exploring these reforms, it would not support reforms that would create inconsistencies or fuel speculation and conjecture after officer-involved deaths, saying that is "not helpful to anybody."

Currently, officers are allowed to walk-through crime scenes and view video evidence before giving a statement. Neuman said some victims advocates have claimed that allows officers to "assess what the best story is."

Palmer disagreed, citing research from the Police Executive Research Forum that those practices help officers make accurate reports. He called the idea that police officers would tailor their story to fit the evidence "completely misplaced."

"I think the evidence is going to be what the evidence is," he said.

The poll also found that 80 percent of Wisconsinites oppose concealed weapons in K-12 schools and 71 percent oppose concealed weapons in universities.

Palmer said that the Wisconsin Professional Police Association also opposes concealed carry in schools.

"That's not something that's going to make our state any safer," he said.

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