

# ATLANTA FORWARD

## »Insights

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"Ask yourself one question. 'Is it right?' Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country." — James M. Cox, founder, Cox Enterprises

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## I'm a police chief. I know about use of force

And recent data about police behavior tells a different story than many believe.

By Louis M. Dekmar

Contrary to the narrative and beliefs of some, and the seemingly numerous news accounts, in Georgia, the application of force by police is infrequent and police use of deadly force rare.

Recently, the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police (GACP) gathered detailed information from 254 participating law enforcement agencies that provided police services to 7,675,301 of Georgia's 10,711,908 citizens in 2021.

In 2021, according to the data, 16,190 law enforcement officers had more than 8 million documented contacts with citizens, which includes more than 2 million traffic-related calls such as vehicle accidents and traffic stops.

Less than 3% of all police-citizen encounters, 229,555, resulted in a custodial arrest. What many fail to appreciate, but all police officers understand, is the bulk of our police responses and citizen contacts have very little to do with



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crime and everything to do with some form of social services, which if not handled properly impacts public safety and crime.

Police actions in most cases involve mediation, de-escalation, problem-solving, medical emergencies (such as use of Narcan, tourniquets, AEDs or CPR), welfare checks and referrals to other community resources.

Enforcement of the law which result in an arrest is the exception in citizen-police interactions, while service is the rule.

GACP data found that in situations where an arrest was warranted, force was applied in 9,905 instances, or 4.32% of the time and in less than 0.12% of all police/citizen con-

tacts and calls for service. The nature of less-lethal force used includes arm bars, take-downs, leg sweeps, OC (pepper) spray, baton and Electronic Controlled Weapons (Taser). The application of these tools or techniques comprised over 98% of the incidents involving use of force between the police and an arrestee.

Officer-involved shootings, which garner significant media coverage and social media exchanges, occurred in a fraction of those cases. Some 142 such incidents were reported by agencies providing data. In 2021, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), which investigates all police-involved shootings statewide except for one agency, reported 55 persons

were killed by law enforcement, or one in about every 145,000 citizen contacts or .0007% of all contacts. These were interactions that include dynamic situations involving those affected by mental illness, substance abuse, emotionally charged domestic assaults, criminal gangs, carjackings, robberies and any number of difficult people in critical and highly volatile situations. In that same year, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 7 Georgia law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty.

During this period of intense and appropriate police scrutiny, it is critical that policymakers and those charged with informing the public place a premium on context and data.

But in the recent past, and to the public safety detriment of many communities, some legislative initiatives, funding decisions and the erosion of vocal political support surrounding the police have been prejudiced by loud voices, not rational ones. The consequence to those jurisdictions that placed community activists' demands two years ago of reimagining the police over sound public safety policy are now literally paying the price in record numbers of police officer retirements and resignations and record violent crime rates.

The financial costs to those jurisdictions shows increased pay and record "sign-on" bonuses of \$30,000 to generate police officer applicants for cities that reacted to noise, and not evidence.

The costs to communities in lost and damaged lives is incalculable.

Competitive salaries alone will not attract police applicants committed to serving their communities, or increase the public's safety. Thoughtful local and state leadership and sound legislation supported by data and research will appeal to those who want to join the ranks of police service. In the area of police use of force, facts frequently contradict some common narratives.

Louis M. Dekmar is chief of the LaGrange Police Department.