Brian Boss, Akron (Ohio) Police Department training officer, instructs police cadet Morgan Muster as she practices a self-defense movement. PHOTOS BY MIKE CARDEW/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

Experts debate training in police de-escalation

Push renewed after shooting of teen carrying fake gun in Ohio

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AKRON, Ohio – Akron police officer Ryan Westlake stopped his cruiser next to a teenager carrying what looked like a pistol on a tree-lined stretch of road.

Westlake — once fired and then rehired by the city after violent incidents both on and off the job – initially sounded calm, even friendly with the teen during the April 1 encounter.

"Where you comin' from?" he asked 15-year-old Tavion Koonce-Williams through the open window of his cruiser.

Before Tavion could answer, Westlake opened his cruiser door and asked: "Can I see your hands real quick?"

Then, without warning, Westlake fired a shot that hits Tavion in the wrist.

Westlake seemed almost as surprised as Tavion as the youth yelled repeatedly that the gun he was carrying is "fake," a toy that looks strikingly similar to a real pistol.

Tavion, bleeding, face down in someone's yard, pleaded with officers in the moments after, saying he "just wanted to be safe."

Akron NAACP President Judi Hill calls for police de-escalation training after the April 1 nonfatal shooting of Tavion Koonce-Williams, 15.

"They said, 'You're going to teach us to hesitate … you're going to get us killed.'"

Robin S. Engel
Researcher into police practices who shadowed on-duty officers

De-escalation

The Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation is still gathering information about the shooting, and law enforcement academics interviewed for this story declined to weigh in on whether it was justified. Bodycam video alone, they said, doesn't provide enough information to judge.

On May 6, city and police leaders fired Westlake over his actions in two use-of-force incidents.

"Your actions in these instances demonstrate your continued disregard for the rules, regulations, and policies of the Akron Police Department," police supervisors wrote in a notice of the latest disciplinary action against Westlake. "Your previous disciplines and counseling sessions have not corrected your behavior. Your actions bring the city of Akron into disrepute or ridicule and demonstrate that you are unable to safely and effectively serve as a police officer."

But Tavion's family and some in the community are outraged by another police shooting of an African American, particularly a teenager carrying a toy gun. A facsimile firearm charge filed against Tavion was dismissed Monday morning pending further investigation.

Akron NAACP President Judi Hill has renewed her call for increased de-escalation training for Akron police.

But would more or better training have prevented this shooting, and could it prevent others?

Can de-escalation training work?

Cincinnati was reeling in 2015 after a University of Cincinnati police officer shot and killed an unarmed Black man after pulling him over for driving without a front license plate near campus.

The incident drew worldwide attention, and the university at the time responded to the crisis, in part, by taking an unusual step: Putting a professor, a criminal justice researcher, in charge of university police oversight and reform.

Robin S. Engel had never been an officer, but by then, she had spent two decades shadowing on-duty police across the country, using hands-on experience as part of her research into everything from best-practice policing to crime-reduction strategies.

At the time, the buzz about police de-escalation training was just beginning.

Engel was curious, but said during a recent interview she discovered there was no uniformity to de-escalation curriculum, nor research about what was effective.

Part of that lack of information was because many police officers pushed back against the idea of de-escalation, she said.

"They said, 'You're going to teach us to hesitate ... you're going to get us killed,' " she said.

Police historically were taught to quickly resolve any situation with whatever force they needed before it could escalate.

De-escalation, long used by SWAT teams during standoffs and other assignments, instead teaches officers to take their time, keep their distance and take safe cover until a situation can be resolved.

Now, nine years later, there's a growing body of research — in large part driven by Engel — that quality de-escalation training keeps not only citizens safer, but police officers, too.

Engel led perhaps the most comprehensive study, focusing on Louisville, Kentucky, police and what happened after the department implemented de-escalation training in 2019.

Louisville police relied on training developed by the nonprofit Police Execu-

tive Research Forum. PERF is part of a collaborative effort with the National Policing Institute and Bureau of Justice Assistance (part of the U.S. Justice Department) to create a curriculum and standards for police de-escalation training.

They call the training ICAT, and it's anchored in critical decision-making that helps front-line officers assess situations, make safe and effective decisions, and document and learn from their actions.

The training focuses on policing people in a crisis and those who are armed with weapons other than firearms.

The randomized study of how well ICAT training worked in Louisville was released in 2022, and Engel said the results exceeded expectations — even hers.

It showed that after the training, the department had 28% fewer use-of-force incidents, 26% fewer injuries to community members and 36% fewer injuries to police officers.

One of the reasons it had such an impact, she said, is that Louisville had especially good trainers whom officers trusted.

Engel said her research shows female officers are more likely to be receptive to de-escalation training. But, she said, police leadership can convince skeptical officers, too, by explaining how de-escalation training is there to keep both officers and citizens safe.

For the training to work long-term, she said, police supervisors must continually re-emphasize de-escalation.

In Ohio, only the University of Cincinnati and Dayton police departments use ICAT training, according to PERF's website. But Engel believes police across the country will soon adopt ICAT and similar training as best practice, marking an evolution in policing.

Training no 'magic fairy dust'

Police in Akron have long had de-escalation training, but the concepts and words used to describe it have changed over the years, Akron Police Capt. Michael Miller said.

Aspiring officers start out with 24 hours of crisis intervention training from the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy. De-escalation is also built into other training, including how to control a person, ethics and professionalism and critical incident stress awareness, he said

Then, after the academy but before Akron officers hit the street, the department provides another eight-hour

course in de-escalation, he said.

In the past, it was called "street survival" or "verbal judo," Miller said.

But whatever the training was called, it was about "the ability to communicate effectively and from a position of safety (that) allows for our officers to have discretionary time to make decisions."

Akron officers certified to carry a Taser also have yearly training, which includes at least one de-escalation scenario using virtual reality.

The virtual situation changes in real time, with threats and tension rising and falling depending how an officer is responding.

"On top of that, the entire department reads and tests on our (use-of-force) policy annually, which says, 'When dealing with an angry, agitated, or non-compliant subject, the objective is to utilize de-escalation techniques to calm the individual and obtain voluntary cooperation' in the opening paragraph," Miller said.

In Ohio, all police are required to have 737 hours of training.

Academies like Akron's must meet at least a dozen extra criteria, including that 85% of cadets eligible to take the state certification exam pass.

But he worries that some see de-escalation training as some sort of "magic fairy dust" that will eliminate all police use of force.

It can't, he and others who study de-escalation say.

Many hoped police shootings would drop after promises of police reform, particularly over the past decade.

However, The Washington Post reported that U.S. police shot and killed more people in 2023 than ever before – 1,162.

Expert sees de-escalation at start of Akron incident

Guns are everywhere in the U.S., said Katherine Schweit, a lawyer, professor and former FBI special agent executive who created the FBI's active shooter response program.

In 2020, the National Shooting Sports Foundation — the gun industry's trade group — estimated there were 433.9 million firearms in the hands of about 331 million U.S. residents.

During the pandemic, Schweit said, 60 million more guns were sold, with about 5% purchased by new gun owners.

In a country where laws allow more people to carry guns, law enforcement must calculate new risks, she said.

Schweit watched the police body

camera video of Westlake shooting Tavion and shared several takeaways, even though she said she didn't know enough to say whether the shooting was justified.

With so many people carrying so many guns, police often determine a threat by whether the gun someone is carrying is holstered or unholstered.

"Action is faster than reaction. If you raise a gun to shoot me, I'm not going to be able to react as quick," she said. "That's basic gun 101, and therefore, a law enforcement officer responding (to a call involving a gun) has to be prepared they may be fired on before they get out of their car."

The gun Tavion was carrying turned out to be a toy, but Westlake didn't know that. Because it was a toy, Schweit said she doubts Tavion had it holstered, emphasizing that Tavion did nothing wrong.

The initial words from Westlake to Tavion are more conversational than confrontational, reflecting what many police are now taught, she said.

"He didn't roll down the window and yell, 'Drop the gun!' " she said. "What you heard out of that officer's mouth is de-escalation."

Why Westlake pulled the trigger is not clear.

"Law enforcement eyes go right to where the barrel of a gun is," Schweit said.

Bodycam video doesn't show what Westlake saw, nor other circumstances that may have influenced him pulling the trigger, she said.

"It may have been an accidental trigger pull. We just don't know," she said.

Schweit praised Tavion for telling officers the gun was "fake," and she also praised the officers who arrived moments after the shooting and put a tourniquet on Tavion's arm to slow the bleeding.

"Within seconds, they were tending to that young man," Schweit said. "Years ago, law enforcement wouldn't have the equipment to do that or know how. I love to see that."

That's the benefit of good training, she said, and something police everywhere need more of, suggesting that police should train as often as firefighters, which often doesn't happen in small departments.

Schweit again said she was not justifying the shooting, but asked the community to consider: "What should the law enforcement officer have done differently given the information he had at the time?"

Akron police officer Ryan Westlake confronts Tavion Koonce-Williams, who was carrying a fake gun, in this April 1 officer bodycam image. Westlake shot Tavion in the wrist. KRON POLICE BODY CAMERA FOOTAGE