



Local police say community relations good

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A December 2016 study by the CATO Institute in Washington D.C. shows that 64% of Americans have a favorable view of police. The same study found that 61% of them also believe the nation is experiencing a “war on police.”

Palestine Police Lt. Gabriel Green said overall police/community relations in Palestine are also “extremely positive,” though he acknowledged tensions exist.

“We’re always going to have that, but it is a minority,” he told the Herald-Press. “But one extremist can do a lot of damage.”

One challenge local police could have in improving community relations is the department's racial makeup. Of the Palestine Police Department's 41 sworn officers, only one, or less than 3 percent, is African American, and one is female. The city has up to four Hispanic officers, Public Information Officer Nate Smith said.

By contrast, census figures report that roughly 23 percent of Palestine's population is African American and 21 percent is Hispanic.

Another problem on both the local and national level: the practice and perception of racial profiling, or singling certain groups out for selective enforcement because of their race or ethnicity.

The CATO study concluded that 65% of Americans – nearly two of three – believe that police officers commonly “stop motorists and pedestrians of certain racial or ethnic backgrounds because the officer believes these groups are more likely than others to commit certain types of crimes.”

The Herald-Press recently obtained a 2015 study conducted by the city on racial profiling. Information for 2016 has yet to be compiled or published, said Lt. Green.

The 2015 police study did not demonstrate that people of color in Palestine were subject to racial profiling. Police that year made 3,640 warning and citation stops. Of those stops, 2,211 (61%) were white, and 817 (22%) were African American. The remaining stops consisted of 584 (16%) for Hispanics, and 19 (1%) were of Asian descent.

Even so, Green said maintaining good community relations with all Palestine residents is an ongoing responsibility. He said the department's many community programs show that local police understand that mandate.

“Coffee with a Cop,” a program initiated by Community Liaison Officer Bernadette Capron, is one such initiative that occurs in cities nationwide. Citizens and police are encouraged to meet over coffee to learn more about each other.

Another program is the “Citizens Police Academy.” This 12-week course aims to educate residents on police procedures, build relationships between police and citizens, and increase communication and public awareness.

“In being able to reach out to the community, all of these programs have been very successful,” Green said.

Critics say, however, that such programs attract mostly people who already trust the police.

A full list of available community programs can be found at the department's website:

Green believes that public perception is at least as important as police procedures when it comes to building relationships.

“Perception is reality,” he said. The department has embraced social media as a tool to improve citizens' perception of police.

With more than two-thirds of American adults registered on Facebook, and most cell phones capable of recording video, disputes between police officers and citizens can go viral in seconds.

Green said social media promotes police transparency. “We also use it to find leads on cases and to keep the public informed,” he said. During the recent June 30 murder arrest of Andrew Taylor, Green said, “people were afraid, and [thanks to social media] we were there to address those fears.”

“It also allows us to get out a lot of educational materials,” Smith said. “And it helps to showcase our community involvement.”

Green acknowledged that social media can mislead people around the world. “The world is always watching,” he said. “But, at the same time, we made an oath to the citizens here.

“What we want more than anything is a true partnership with the city,” Green said. “We want a beneficial working relationship with every citizen.”