



More than 100 N.J. police departments couldn't give us diversity data. That's bad for police accountability.

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The questions were meant to be simple.

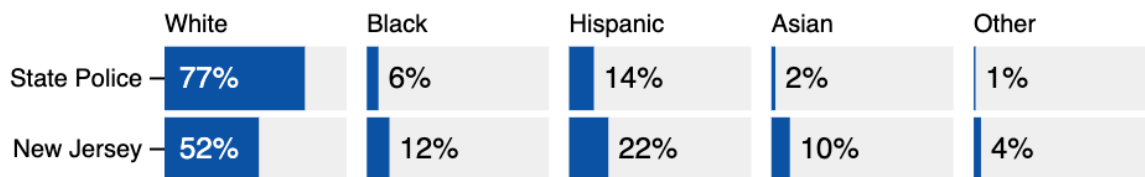
What do New Jersey's police departments look like?

And how well do they represent their communities?

State authorities had no comprehensive answer. In an era of unprecedented police scrutiny, no one was tracking the diversity of New Jersey's law enforcement officers at any scale.

New Jersey

Race & ethnicity



Race & ethnicity values are rounded to the nearest percentage point and may add up to more than 100%.

Resident demographic data from 2020 Census.

Police demographic data collected by [Payton Guion](#) and [Rodrigo Torrejón](#).

Graphics by [Seth Vincent](#)

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For those New Jersey departments to either not collect or be unwilling to share data detailing the diversity of their departments is a failure of basic accountability and one that stymies efforts at improved policing in the state, experts say.

But the gaping blindspot didn't shock policing experts and researchers. It's become a bit of an inside joke among people trying to hold police accountable in the United States for years.

“For a very long time police departments were what we researchers call a ‘closed organization.’ You simply could not get access to data,” said Delores Jones-Brown, founding director of the John Jay College Center on Race, Crime and Justice. “We lose the full capacity to hold police accountable to the public that pays their salary.

“There was little understanding of how much it would help the public to be able to hold officers accountable when they engage in excessive behavior.”

But Jones-Brown said the national reckoning over police misconduct in recent years has helped change the public perception on the need for more substantial data from police.

“I have not seen any incident that became a highly publicized incident where there wasn't some information available about the officer, the specialized unit, the climate of the department itself that says this is a (possible) outcome because this is how this department has been operating,” she said.

New Jersey is among the states that has recently started releasing more comprehensive police statistics. The state attorney general now requires law enforcement agencies to publish data about

how often police use force. That change came after a 2018 NJ Advance Media investigation found police used force at rates higher than previously understood and faced little accountability for it.

But experts say that police in New Jersey and most other states are still not providing enough data for the public to know if they're effectively serving their communities.

“Overall, this has not really been a sufficient part of police culture in America, to record and measure data about what police are doing, with whom and why,” said Clark Neily, a police researcher with the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank. “We are told that, for example, that police are worth the money we spend on them and we receive all these benefits from this police force.

“That’s a fine rhetorical point to make. Do we really have the data to support it?”

Police have long been required to report basic measures of public safety, like crimes committed. New Jersey police departments report their crime statistics to the State Police, which then files an annual report to the FBI. That data is released nationwide in the Uniform Crime Report. Much of the crime-rate data seen in the media and heard from politicians comes from those reports.

The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics also collects general data on the makeup and training of the country’s 12,300 police departments, but that data hasn’t been updated in five years.

While a low crime rate is typically seen as a good thing, it doesn’t really begin to tell us if our police are actually doing a good job. And many of the metrics that might begin to answer some of those questions aren’t widely or consistently available.

“Opacity is something that supports a regime. Whatever regime we have, it thrives on the lack of information,” said Andres Rengifo, a police researcher at Rutgers University. “I don’t think it’s an accident.

“When we look at police killings, why don’t we have data on police killings? Is it just because someone forgot about it 50 years ago? I think it’s because the thought has been ... if we don’t measure it, the answer is zero.”

But, as reporters found working on this project, even much simpler police statistics can be hard to come by. And Rengifo said that when such basic data is unavailable, it raises serious questions about police performance in other areas.

“It is critical for the state to be able to answer whether we are making progress in racial and ethnic representation or if it’s desirable,” he said. “In the case of law enforcement, it’s a lot more important because law enforcement represents authority. These are life and death decisions.”

The New Jersey agencies that were unable produce diversity data could soon find themselves on the wrong side of the law.

Under a law that took effect in February, every police department in the state must now develop a plan to recruit minority officers and further diversify their agencies. Each department is required to post their minority recruitment efforts on their websites, with county prosecutors responsible for overseeing these efforts, said AG spokesman Steve Barnes.

The law also requires every law enforcement agency in the state to file an annual report with the race, ethnicity and gender of officers employed by the agency.

That's where some agencies might fall short. When NJ Advance Media was collecting police diversity data for this project, between fall 2020 and this summer, dozens of departments said they could not provide it because they have no way to account for it.

But as important as accurate and consistent data is to begin holding police more accountable, Jones-Brown says, the numbers alone won't solve the existing problems with law enforcement.

"Data isn't the end all and be all of understanding how we ended up in this place," the researcher from John Jay College said.