

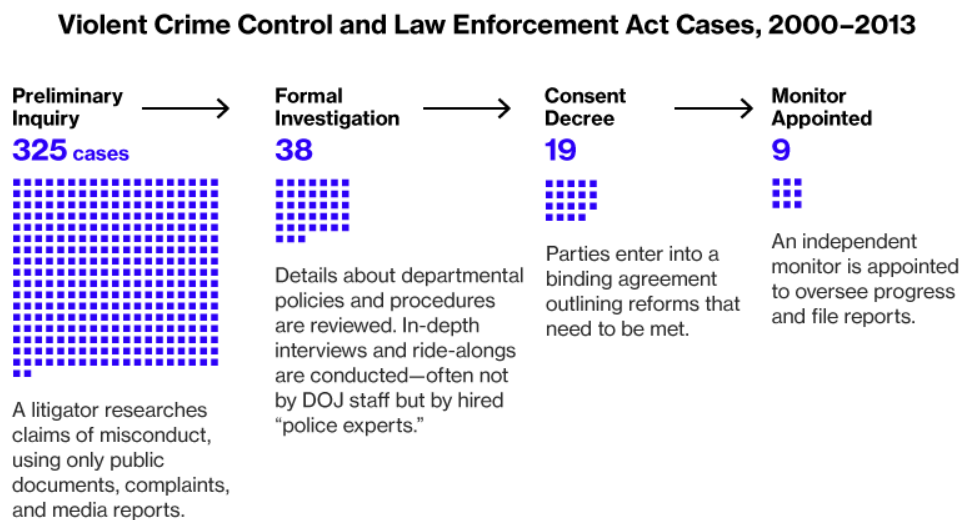
Police Accountability: A Look At the Seattle Police Department and the University of Washington Police Department

Historically known for its racial profiling and excessive force, the Seattle Police Department has recently faced scrutiny on both a local and national level. Many were aware of the fatal shooting of Charleena Lyles, 30-year old, African American, pregnant mother. She was shot and killed by two Seattle police officers when she called for help after a burglary. Public outrage regarding excessive force swept Seattle shortly after the incident but SPD affirmed and defended the officers by stating that they operated within policy.

This is just one example of the lack of accountability in the police academy, particularly when force is applied unnecessarily. Within the past month, the Seattle Police Department and the University of Washington Police Department have endured an onslaught of internal issues, highlighting the need for increased accountability, citizen protection, and institutional reform.

(Non)compliance with consent decree

The Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted an investigation of SPD in 2011. During the investigation, it was noted that “of the cases that [it] determined to be unnecessary or excessive uses of force, over 50 percent involved minorities. This is despite the fact that minorities make up less than 35 percent of Seattle’s population, and that “SPD officers may stop a disproportionate number of people of color where no offense or other police incident occurred.” These statistics have been upsetting for activists and the public at large; the Seattle PD claims to have made internal changes to promote more constitutionally compliant policing but has yet to provide any public evidence of such reforms.



Source: *Federal Enforcement of Police Reform* (2014), Stephen Rushin

Graphic showing the rarity of the type of federal police department investigations that the Seattle PD is under ([Bloomberg News](#), 2015)

Since July of 2012, the Seattle Police Department has operated under DOJ supervision through a consent decree which was instituted based on observed patterns of racially disproportionate and excessive use of force within the Department. This agreement was signed by both the SPD and the DOJ. It aims to establish bias-free policing through training and involvement of citizen review.

However, on May 21, 2019, US District Court Judge James Robart ruled that Seattle PD was partially out of compliance with the consent decree with respect to its system for holding its officers accountable. It cited a recent incident in which an officer was fired for punching a woman while she was handcuffed. The officer was rehired shortly after. The Judge stated that the systems of discipline and accountability must be updated and brought into compliance before he would consider terminating the consent decree.

I-940

In November of 2018, Washington State voters approved a police accountability law called Initiative 940. I-940 was drafted to remove barriers which make it difficult to prosecute police who are involved with fatal shootings. Some of these barriers include the requirement that prosecutors prove “malice” in order to hold an officer criminally liable, making it virtually impossible to convict officers who have killed out of recklessness or negligence.

Through its passage, I-940 has mandated a ‘good-faith test’ for measuring justifications for use of force, as well as de-escalation, mental health training, and a requirement for first aid at the scene. The good faith test determines when an officers’ deadly use of force is justifiable. Supporters hope that these steps will increase police accountability throughout Washington state.

A draft of the new curriculum under this Initiative was due on May 23, 2019. The curriculum was designed with input from community members and organizations, including the ACLU, who are stakeholders in police accountability. The drafted curriculum has yet to be released to public but is expected to address de-escalation tactics and mental health training, as outlined in I-940.

University of Washington Police Department

UWPD has a historically tense relationship with resistance groups at the Seattle campus, which has created a somewhat negative police-student relationship, particularly with marginalized students.

In 2012, the University of Washington Student Worker Coalition (SWC) learned that the UWPD had authorized an officer to go undercover to attend their group meetings. The officer spied on its members in hopes of collecting information about upcoming demonstrations and events. These types of incidents have led to students feeling betrayed by the very people who claim to provide them with protection and service.



UWPD officer sprays teargas at students during a protest ([KUOW News](#), 2019)

An external review of the UWPD released on May 3, 2019 revealed tension within the department itself, specifically concerning the now-former Chief of Police John Vinson. After numerous complaints were made about him, an independent agency began an investigation. Employees reported an atmosphere of “hostility, retaliation and unethical behavior.” 90 percent of UWPD employees were surveyed over the course of the investigation. Although Vinson claims his resignation was unrelated to this criticism, there continues to be ambiguity surrounding communication within the department, as well as its relationship to students. Internal officer dissatisfaction appears to correlate with external student disapproval and distrust.

Moreover, the issues with UW campus police reflect many of the larger scale problems of distrust and lack of accountability that exist with the Seattle PD and even more broadly throughout the United States.