

Tulsa Police Investigate Officer After Remarks About Race and Shootings

 [nytimes.com/2020/06/12/us/tulsa-police-major-comments.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/us/tulsa-police-major-comments.html)

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The Police Department in Tulsa, Okla., said it was investigating one of its officers over remarks he made in a radio interview this week in which he spoke about police shootings of black Americans, amid nationwide protests against racism and ahead of President Trump's visit next week.

The officer, Maj. Travis Yates, said in the interview that police officers were “shooting African-Americans about 24 percent less than we probably ought to be, based on the crimes being committed.”

In a telephone interview, Major Yates emphasized that he was “talking about the data” from others’ research. In a statement, he said, “To think that, beyond a discussion of comparative statistics, that I would suggest that the ‘police should actually be shooting’ anyone is simply outrageous.”

But his remarks were emphatically denounced by the mayor and the president of a black officers’ coalition. And the controversy brought the department under renewed scrutiny, as protests around the country have drawn attention to racial disparities in arrests and the use of force, and have called for greater police accountability. This week, the Tulsa police also announced an inquiry into the arrest of a black teenager who was accused of jaywalking and is shown in body camera footage being forced to the ground by officers.

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“We do not endorse, condone or support Yates’ comments made on the show,” the Tulsa Police Department said in a statement on Wednesday, adding that its Internal Affairs Unit was investigating.

“We want to make it clear the statements made by Yates are not a part of any curriculum or training provided by the department,” it said. “Yates’ comments do not align with the mission, values or policies of the Tulsa Police.”

In a statement that day, Mayor G.T. Bynum said, “I want to believe he didn’t intend to say what he did, but what he did say goes against everything we are trying to achieve in community policing.”

“If he didn’t mean to make the statement in the way it has been received,” he added, “he owes Tulsans a clarification and an apology.”

Lt. Marcus Harper, the president of the Tulsa Black Officers Coalition, said the comments were disturbing and raised concerns about whether police officers conduct law enforcement differently in black neighborhoods.

Lieutenant Harper said in a news conference on Wednesday that the major had made “inflammatory” statements about police work and race before. In a 2016 essay, Major Yates wrote, “Follow the commands of a police officer or risk dying.” In 2018, he linked fatherless households with disparities in “police contacts,” saying they had “decimated African-Americans.”

“It seems like every so often, every time he opens his mouth, we are taking 10 steps forward and taking 100 steps back,” Lieutenant Harper said. “So now you have to ask yourself: Is he the voice of the Tulsa Police Department?”

In the radio interview on Monday, Major Yates, 48, was introduced as a private citizen who was not speaking for the Tulsa department. In his remarks about police shootings, he said he was citing research from the National Academy of Sciences; Dr. Roland G. Fryer, a Harvard economist; and Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative research group.



Chief Wendell Franklin of the Tulsa police, left, and Mayor G.T. Bynum at City Hall on June 1. Major Yates “owes Tulsans a clarification and an apology,” Mayor Bynum said on Wednesday. Credit...Matt Barnard/Tulsa World, via Associated Press

Major Yates told the radio host Pat Campbell that there was a “meme” about black people being shot “two times, two and a half times more” than other people. “They’re not making sense,” he said. “You have to come into contact with law enforcement for that to occur.”

“If a certain group is committing more crimes, more violent crimes, and law enforcement’s having to come into more contact with them, then that number is going to be higher,” he said. “Who in the world in their right mind would think that our shootings should be right along the U.S. census lines?”

Major Yates said in his statement that news articles had misrepresented his “hypothetical discussion of statistics based on the research of others.”

In the telephone interview, Major Yates said he had been speaking in demographic terms. “Crime does not fall along the U.S. census,” he said. “There are a lot of social things that occur with it.”

Asked whether he believed more black people are shot by the police than white people, he said: “You have to apply law enforcement with people you are coming in contact with. Are you going to look at population or crime? When you talk about demographic parity, that is very difficult.”

He said he had been quoting President Barack Obama in his remarks on fatherless households, and that he was willing to speak with anyone who disagreed with him.

The investigation into Major Yates was opened days after the police in Oklahoma City, responding to calls from Black Lives Matter, released video from the 2019 arrest of a black man who died in custody. It also comes as Tulsa — and its history of racist violence — falls under a national spotlight with the president’s visit. Mr. Trump’s rally is scheduled for June 19, or Juneteenth, the date that commemorates the end of slavery.

Mayor Bynum acknowledged the strains many Tulsans were feeling. “This is a moment in our city when every word you say can work to hurt or to heal,” he said. “Several of us are falling short.”

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