

Camden Police Emphasize Community relations, non-leathalforce

By DEMARCO MORGAN CBS NEWS July 8, 2016, 8:02 PM

CAMDEN, N.J. -- We've seen [the mistrust between police and minority communities](#) play out across the country this week. But Camden, New Jersey has taken a major step toward fixing that.

Camden Police Sgt. Raphael Thornton has been an officer for nearly 20 years. Thornton, who grew up here, now commands the Neighborhood Response Teams -- training officers to get out of their patrol cars and engage with members in the community.

"You're going to have to fight and scrap and earn the community's trust," Thornton told CBS News.

In 2013, Camden replaced its entire police force, once plagued by deep budget cuts and corruption. The new department is half minority with fewer desk jobs and squad cars because they want more boots on the ground.

"You can't just see a criminal, you can't -- You got to see a man, and you have to have respect for each other," Thornton said.

Camden's new training tactics emphasize deescalation. Police point to an incident which was captured on a body camera last year.

Officers kept their distance and talked the man, telling him to drop his knife. Lt. Kevin Lutz says the officers eventually used non-lethal force, which is all part of their training.

"A few years ago that probably would have ended in a deadly force encounter, and the officers were able to communicate, provide distance, time and cover," Lutz said.



Police officers walk their beat on Friday, July 8, 2016 in Camden, N.J.

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Lutz says handcuffs and service weapons are tools of last resort. The department says that the new training is paying off. Over a period of three years, homicides are down 52 percent.

"Not everybody is going to be able to deescalated," Lutz said. "But I think through this training, if we are able to have them thinking morally, have them acting ethically, that more often than not those deadly force encounters can be avoided."

Just four years ago, Camden was known as one of America's most dangerous cities. Last year, President Obama praised the department for its efforts to build better relationships with its community.

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