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Here's What We Know About Private-College Police Departments

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The University of Chicago Police Department, one of many private-college forces with the power to arrest and detain, has faced repeated accusations of racial profiling. The department has drawn new scrutiny this week after the shooting of a student who reportedly charged an officer with a metal pole.

Four years ago, Quinn Lester was decidedly not an expert on police-accountability issues and law-enforcement abuses. Fresh

off completing his bachelor's at Pomona College, Lester's main focus in 2014 was completing his Ph.D. in political science at the Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore.

But this year, when Hopkins indicated it would seek permission from the State of Maryland to obtain arrest powers for its campus security officers, Lester was among a group of students, community groups, and local residents who beat that proposal back. In the face of an intense lobbying campaign, Hopkins announced this week that it would reconsider the plan.

For Lester, the metamorphosis from ambivalence to activism didn't start because of run-ins with police or a general distrust of authority. It started with Freddie Gray. According to an autopsy report [obtained](#) by *The Baltimore Sun*, Gray, a 25-year-old African-American man, died in 2015 from a single "high-energy injury" to his neck and spine while being transported by Baltimore police. The state medical examiner ruled the death a homicide, citing officers for failure to follow safety policies. [Charges against the officers](#) ranged from murder to illegal arrest, though the cases eventually ended in mistrial, acquittals, or dropped charges.

The movement at Hopkins is a continuation of the activism seen on American campuses in the wake of the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, in Ferguson, Mo. That incident spawned the Black Lives Matter movement, which resonated on campuses nationwide, including [the University of Missouri at Columbia](#). More recently, campus activists have homed in on the role of law enforcement, as in [2017 protests at Georgia Tech](#) that followed the fatal shooting of a student by campus police.

Now, campus police forces are coming under increased scrutiny at private institutions like Hopkins and the University of Chicago. Throughout its history, the University of Chicago Police Department has faced repeated accusations of racial profiling. [A 2016 analysis](#) by *The Chicago Reporter* found that all but 11 of the local nonstudent residents who were stopped and questioned by UCPD were African-American.

Officials with Johns Hopkins declined to be interviewed for this article. [In a statement](#) published on its website, the university said it welcomed amendments to the bill that would have granted arrest powers to Hopkins officers, including the creation of an accountability board and annual disclosures of police interactions. “These changes will allow us to reach our goal of building a model university police department that reflects the highest standards and best practices of policing nationally,” President Ronald J. Daniels wrote in the statement. [The university said](#) the desire to seek arrest powers arose from increased incidents of serious crime near its campus locations since 2015.

What do we know about private-college police departments? For one thing, they’re more common than one might think. Ninety-six police forces at private universities and colleges [reported](#) one

arrest or more between 2006 and 2015 to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, according to an analysis by *The Chronicle*. An additional 100 four-year private universities [told](#) the U.S. Department of Justice in 2011-12 that their police forces included at least one sworn police officer — that is, an officer with full arrest powers granted by a state or local authority. (This count of 196 private-college and university police forces is very likely understated because of the voluntary nature of arrest reporting to the FBI and the limited scope of the Justice Department survey.)

Lester said the position of the particular student group to which he belongs, Students Against Private Police, is that the university should find alternative ways of dealing with crime in the area, such as municipal safety [initiatives](#).

“In no way has Hopkins justified why even a police force with a lot of caveats attached to it would be any better or safer,” Lester said.

Concerns About Accountability

As private-university police departments have gained greater law-enforcement powers, state legislatures and courts have wrestled with what regulations and protections cover the officers.

The Texas Supreme Court and Texas Court of Appeals [ruled](#) a Rice University police officer could not be held liable for an arrest that ended with dropped charges. The court found that the officer was entitled to the same protections from legal claims arising against public officials acting in their sanctioned capacities. The North Carolina Court of Appeals [reached a similar conclusion](#) for the Duke University Police Department after one of its officers fatally shot an alleged panhandler outside the university's hospital.

Officers and hospital visitors alleged that the man wrestled a firearm out of the officer's holster and refused to release the weapon. Conversely, Georgia's Supreme Court [ruled](#) that police officers at Agnes Scott College were not entitled to such an immunity.

Transparency is also a concern, Lester and other advocates say. In 2016 the Indiana Supreme Court [ruled](#) that state-imbued arrest powers did not require the University of Notre Dame to give ESPN crime reports that pertained to student athletes. And a 2016 [review](#) by the Student Press Law Center found that only Connecticut, Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia had enacted legislation requiring some sort of disclosure by private police departments sanctioned by the state. And even in states with transparency laws, some private-university actors fail to adhere to the spirit of the law. In the case of Duke, the university has typically provided only the first page of police reports while sometimes redacting portions of that single page.

But unlike municipal police departments, private-college police departments are required to comply with crime and safety reporting under the Clery Act, said David Tedjeske, director of public safety and chief of police at Villanova University. In addition, Tedjeske, who is also Mid-Atlantic Region director of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators, said strict federal laws require college police departments to issue timely alerts to their communities when particular criminal activity occurs on or near campus. And, when it comes to pertinent information related to criminal procedure, Tedjeske said those records can always be accessed through the courts.

“I take issue a little bit with the assertion that we are not as accountable as our municipal counterparts,” Tedjeske said.

Firearms and Jurisdictions

This week, a University of Chicago police officer shot a student after the man [reportedly charged the officer](#) with a metal pole. The student is recovering and has since been [charged](#). His mother claims he was having a psychotic episode.

The Justice Department survey of four-year universities and colleges with 2,500 or more students found that 38 percent of private colleges used sworn police officers in their security operations. Of those 153 departments, 82 percent were authorized to carry sidearms. By contrast, 92 percent of public universities within that cohort used sworn police officers. Nearly all were authorized to use sidearms.

In general, campus police need to be armed because active-shooter situations occur on campus, Tedjeske said. “There have been times when an [armed campus officer](#) has intervened against an active shooter and saved lives.”

Not all university police jurisdictions are created equal. Three-quarters of private-college police departments told the Department Justice their jurisdiction extended to properties adjacent to campus. Nearly 60 percent said their jurisdictions applied to properties outside the area surrounding campus. Twenty percent of departments said they had the authority to make arrests statewide.

Michael Vasquez contributed to this report.