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NJ can teach Washington when it comes to police use of force | Opinion

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March 9, 2026, 9:54 a.m. ET

Police use-of-force has shaped some of the most painful chapters in American history and has the power to divide the population like few other issues. From civil rights-era confrontations to horrific deaths recorded on smartphones on city streets, public trust in law enforcement has often turned on the question of what happened and was it justified.

That debate is now playing out once again — this time around federal immigration enforcement after the widely-shown videos of two fatal shootings in Minnesota. These shootings have sparked new calls for accountability, transparency and better training. Congress is debating reforms that would require clearer use-of-force standards, expand de-escalation training and mandate body cameras for federal immigration officers. This new national debate reflects a growing bipartisan recognition that modern policing — whether local or federal — depends on public confidence.

New Jersey has already taken a practical approach to improve transparency and reduce unnecessary force without undermining officer safety. Washington should look to New Jersey as a blueprint to give law enforcement the tools to succeed when life is literally on the line.

New Jersey has clear rules about police use of force

New Jersey's use-of-force guidelines are built around a simple premise: force should be the last resort. Officers are expected and trained to use the least amount of force reasonably necessary and to continually reassess whether force remains justified or necessary as situations evolve.

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The emphasis is not for an officer to scare a target into submission, rather relying on judgment to de-escalate so that everyone remains safe. New Jersey officers are trained to slow encounters down when possible, using communication, distance and time to reduce tension before force becomes unavoidable.

That philosophy contrasts with much of the debate surrounding ICE operations, where critics and supporters alike often struggle to point to clear, publicly understood standards that govern these federal agents' decisions. Recent proposals in Congress would align federal immigration enforcement more closely with established Department of Justice "DOJ" standards by emphasizing de-escalation and limiting deadly force. Importantly, ICE is not part of the DOJ, but the Department of Homeland Security, so the current guidelines do not apply.

Under the current DOJ policies, deadly force may only be used in limited circumstances. The current policy, updated in 2022, prioritizes de-escalation and prohibits deadly force only in response to imminent, reasonable threats against an officer's life. DOJ guidelines, like New Jersey's, strictly prohibit use-of-force to simply prevent a suspect from fleeing and officers cannot discharge a weapon at a moving car to disable it without reasonable imminency of death or injury.

In many ways, the proposals in Congress and the current DOJ guidelines mirror principles that New Jersey has already embraced at the state level.

Training, training and more training: NJ's use of force emphasis

Training is key to avoid escalation in high-pressure, emotional encounters with the public. While tedious and expensive, frequent and high-quality training programs put officers in the best position to check emotions, assess danger and make good choices.

Policies only matter if officers are trained to apply them in real-world scenarios. Police officers are human beings but are often asked to put aside human emotion in high-pressure, deadly scenarios. That super-human request can only come from practice and learned tools.

That is why New Jersey has increasingly emphasized de-escalation training, including scenario-based exercises that teach officers to manage stress, communicate effectively and reassess when encounters are heading in the wrong direction.

Since 2020, the state has mandated that nearly all 40,000 New Jersey law enforcement officers take the Integrating Communications, Assessment and Tactics "ICAT" and Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement "ABLE" courses. New Jersey joins approximately 30 states and nearly 120 jurisdictions that mandate these de-escalation training modules. These courses, taught by seasoned officers and prosecutors, teach officers strategies for communication, situational awareness, tactical options and accountability to bystanding officers to give many tools to employ before using force.

The goal is not just to control a situation; it is to resolve it safely, with minimal harm.

Federal immigration enforcement is now confronting similar conversations. Proposed federal legislation would establish minimum standards for training across agencies and specifically require instruction on de-escalation techniques like we already have in New Jersey.

While ICAT and ABLE training is still relatively new to New Jersey, data from the National Policing Institute show an overwhelmingly positive reception by law enforcement — nearly 90% of New Jersey trainees found de-escalation tactics a helpful or useful skill. Most importantly, de-escalation in public interactions is becoming the standard model of police training throughout the country at the state and local level. It should become part of the federal standard as well.

While this training is no magic bullet, New Jersey's experience is proof that consistent, high-quality training can help officers make better decisions in fast-moving situations.

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NJ police and the power of body-worn cameras

Few reforms have changed policing as dramatically as body-worn cameras. When the body-worn camera directive was first issued, it was met with a degree of skepticism among New Jersey law enforcement. Over time, practice and some tweaks to the guidelines, it is now seen as an ally and not an enemy.

Body cameras often clarify disputed facts, protect officers from false accusations and provide accountability when mistakes occur. Critically, they serve to alert a prosecutor immediately when there is a problem so that a thorough, fair and transparent investigation can take place without delay. Experienced prosecutors use body-camera footage as the first look in an investigation and build from there.

New Jersey mandates widespread body-camera use and established clear guidelines for when cameras must be activated and how footage is handled after critical incidents. The underlying idea is simple: transparency helps preserve trust, even when outcomes are tragic.

The federal debate over ICE increasingly centers on this same issue. Although ICE announced plans to expand body-camera use nationwide, implementation is uneven because of funding. Body-worn cameras and their video storage systems are expensive. But the public would not have been as well-served had bystanders in Minneapolis not recorded the two shooting deaths on their phones. The best starting point in any fatal shooting investigation is video evidence because it usually speaks for itself and can help the public and police understand the facts surrounding high impact conflicts. That is alone is worth the cost.

In a positive development, DHS recently announced that officers in Minneapolis would immediately begin wearing body cameras following controversial shootings, with promises of broader expansion as funding allows. At the same time, lawmakers have introduced bills requiring all immigration enforcement personnel to wear cameras during operations and setting clearer rules for activation and oversight.

These proposed rules seem to mirror what New Jersey has been doing for years. Body-worn cameras are now baked into the fabric of the state criminal justice system. New Jersey figured out years ago that body cameras are good for everyone, including law enforcement.

Why this moment feels different

What makes the current debate feel different is the growing bipartisan acceptance that transparency and accountability strengthen law enforcement

rather than weaken it.

New Jersey's framework shows that reforms aimed at reducing unnecessary force is not necessarily an anti-cop position. Clear rules reduce uncertainty for officers. Training helps avoid dangerous escalation. Transparency helps us understand what happened after horrific and violent incidents unfold in real time and on video for everyone to see. It helps answer the question of what happened.

None of this eliminates risk or guarantees perfect outcomes. No amount of policy or training can prevent deadly encounters with law enforcement. There will be mistakes and there will be justified uses of force in the future. But clear expectations make it easier to evaluate decisions honestly and improve with time. Make no mistake, New Jersey's approach is not flawless. But it provides a good framework on which to build. Clear rules help answer the question of was it justified.

We should collectively learn from history and not repeat the mistakes of the past. From Kent State to Rodney King to George Floyd, few events have the ability to shake the country like questionable deadly uses of force on civilians. We are now armed with a solution that relies on technology and advanced training to that can produce better results and better transparency. These reforms also do not guarantee the nation will agree the next time there is a high-profile use of force, but at least we will be able to agree on the facts and the rules that apply to use of force.

We now have the tools to be able to answer the question of what happened and was it justified.

Washington should look New Jersey to help answer its current challenge.

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