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SHOULD EVERY TOWN FIELD ITS OWN COPS?

Recent tragedies bring into question the wisdom of small agencies

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. With its roots in an 18th. century plantation owned by the King family, the municipality of [Kingsland, Georgia](#) cleverly bills itself as the “City of Royal Treatment.” Indeed, it seems quite a happy place. Incorporated in 1908, the town of 17,000 boasts a full-service city government and [its own police force](#). In 2016 its proportion of citizens living in poverty ([11 percent](#)) and violent crime rate ([265.1](#)) were substantially lower than comparable figures for both the state (18 percent and 522.5) and the twenty Georgia cities closest in population (26.5 percent and 646.7). Kingsland’s relative prosperity and peacefulness might help explain why its 2016 police staffing of about two officers per 1,000 pop. (it reported [33 sworn personnel](#) that year) was third lowest among nineteen Georgia communities of similar size with their own cops (range 1.7 to 4.0, mean 2.7; click [here](#) for the data file.)

Bottom line: when something bad happens in Kingsland, it’s a big deal. And it’s hard to imagine anything worse, cop-related, than what took place on June 21, when a white Kingsland police officer, Zechariah Presley, 26, [shot and killed](#) Anthony Marcel Green, a 33-year old black man. Green [had a minor history](#) with Kingsland police, the most serious incident being a misdemeanor arrest. As far as is known, he and officer Presley had only interacted once, when a citizen complained that Green trespassed (no one got arrested.) This occasion would turn out quite differently. For reasons as yet unknown, [officer Presley stopped a vehicle driven by Green](#), and for equally unknown reasons Green and his passenger bolted. After radioing in, then-officer Presley chased Green down. They apparently struggled, and Green slipped away. That’s when the cop opened fire, lethally wounding someone who was neither armed nor, according to what’s been officially released, suspected of a crime.

Justice moved swiftly. State investigators [promptly concluded](#) that the shooting met the standards of voluntary manslaughter, meaning that the officer acted “solely as the result of a sudden, violent, and irresistible passion.” Presley was indicted, arrested and fired within a week of the incident. Police also released his personnel records, opening the floodgates about his performance in Kingsland and offering tantalizing insights into his reportedly checkered past. (For three relevant news accounts click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

Indeed, with only one and one-half years on the force the young cop's file seems chuck-full of miscues, including several citizen complaints and a one-day suspension for a high speed, off-duty pursuit. More interestingly, Presley had a number of derogatory pre-employment "flags," including past marijuana use, fights with his wife, an arrest for reckless driving, and being rejected by another agency for allegedly lying during the job application process. Kingsland hired him anyway.

Think "small." Then think a bit smaller. According to its [website](#) the tiny borough of East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania ([pop. 1,844](#)) traces its roots to the turn of the 19th century, when it was formed to serve employees of nearby electrical plants. Incorporated in 1895, it's located about ten miles southeast of downtown Pittsburgh. Sadly, a considerable proportion of its residents – [twenty-six percent](#) by latest estimates – live in poverty. That figure exceeds Pittsburgh's twenty-two percent and is third worst among a group of eleven suburbs of similar population (poverty percentage 2.9 to 30.3; click [here](#) for the data file.) East Pittsburgh last conveyed its crime numbers to the FBI in 2013. At that time, it reported 58 violent crimes, yielding an unusually high rate of 3135 per 100,000. Comparable communities consistently reported much less violent crime. For example, Braddock, with a thirty percent poverty rate, registered eleven violent crimes in 2016, for a rate of 518.

Where does that leave East Pittsburgh, desirability-wise? Not in a particularly good place. While its crime reporting might have exaggerated things, the borough has [earned low livability marks](#) in multiple categories. Here's what one resident reported: "Children constantly throwing paint at my house and car, also not uncommon to hear gunshots."

Briefly put, East Pittsburgh is no Kingsland. Still, just like its Georgia big brother, the tiny Pennsylvania borough, less than a half-mile square, [also fields its own cops](#). According to its website there are presently a chief and eight patrol officers. However, the cop at the bottom of the list, officer Michael Rosefeld, is on leave. Like his Georgia counterpart, he's also under indictment for killing a resident. But in his case, the charge is homicide.

As one might expect, [the circumstances](#) that the East Pittsburgh officer faced were also far more serious. It began with a drive-by in a nearby borough that turned into a shoot-out and left a pedestrian seriously wounded. Officer Rosefeld soon pulled over the suspect vehicle in East Pittsburgh. It bore the visible scars of damage by gunfire. As he handcuffed the driver two passengers bolted. One, a juvenile, got away. But the other, Antwon Rose II, a black 17-year old, didn't make it very far. Although Rose wasn't visibly armed (he didn't have a gun), officer Rosefeld shot him three times.

Two loaded high-powered pistols were found in the car; one was positively linked to the wounding. That gun was tied to the juvenile who fled, and he was arrested the next day and charged in the shooting. No such evidence was forthcoming against the dead youth, who had apparently only been present for the car ride. In the end a potentially great piece of policing became another nightmare for a town that has seen more than its share of hard times. Citing witness accounts and reported inconsistencies in officer Rosefeld's statements (he apparently wavered between seeing something and nothing in the youth's hands) the D.A. charged the thirty-year old white cop with homicide, which under state law can range from murder to involuntary manslaughter.

Here's the rest of the story. Officer Rosefeld had been sworn in to the East Pittsburgh force, which hired him in May, only hours before the shooting. [He had several years' experience](#) as a part-time officer in two small departments and was most recently employed as a campus cop, [a job he reportedly left](#) over concerns about his truthfulness. East Pittsburgh hired him anyway.

Policing has never been a popular profession. [When the economy is up](#) and potential candidates have lots of better-paying, less stressful options, recruitment lags. Small departments must compete with large-agency salaries and career opportunities and are doubly affected. Moreover, whether a community is small or large, it can take lots of cops to properly handle violent incidents. Being down "only" a couple of officers can substantially increase officer risk and reduce effectiveness while exhausting the cops who remain with unwelcome overtime.

In small departments, promptly filling vacancies is crucial. But there may be little time or money to fund recruitment campaigns, hire the most qualified, pay and wait for them to be trained, then wait again until they have enough experience to work alone. So bringing on pre-certified, minimally experienced applicants [is an appealing option](#). Small agencies can thus face the classic choice between a rock (critical cop shortage) and a hard place (risk of hasty or inappropriate decisions). Here's what a new small-town Chief had to say about his struggles to bring a troubled department up to snuff: "Unfortunately, sometimes there's not a lot of money to hire what you need, you just have to make do with what you have." What he already "had" included a cop who had killed one person and wounded three in multiple shootings. That officer was previously employed by other agencies: one had suspended him over a shooting, while another fired him for "misconduct." But he was hired anyway.

Really, how many fire departments do we want? School and sanitary districts? But wait a minute, you say. Policing is different. In small communities with their own

departments cops can really connect with the citizens they serve. Setting aside the fact that many if not most small-town officers literally “parachute” in to work, we’ll concede that smaller agencies might be more responsive, at least at the chief’s level. Perhaps local control can be advantageous in the more affluent, low crime burg’s. And, of course, poor hiring decisions can have horrific consequences regardless of department size. Consider, for example, [that notorious episode](#) several years ago when a rookie Cleveland cop shot and killed Tamir Rice, an innocent 12-year old who was playing with a toy gun. It turned out that Cleveland hired the officer after a suburban police department pressured him, for behavioral issues, to leave after only serving one month. That agency, in turn, had hired him despite his rejection by several other departments.

Still, given the economic and practical constraints of running small police departments, we’re skeptical that they’re *ever* a good notion. We’ll leave the final word to the editorial board of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Writing after the killing of Antwon Rose, here is how [their recommendations](#) begin:

First, while the spirit of parochialism remains firmly entrenched here, municipalities should consider merging their police departments into regional forces that could leverage economies of scale. Pooling resources could make for more efficient patrolling and free up time and money for training. A larger force potentially would be more attractive to prospective hires and enable a department to tap into a deeper talent pool.

Couldn’t have said it better ourselves.