



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on September 9, 2015

Madison Police Officer Attacked by Angry Crowd; Diffuses Situation

Last week a police officer was surrounded by a large, angry crowd and attacked. Some in the crowd were heard saying, “We need to start killing these officers.” The situation could easily have ended badly. The officer involved could be dead, as well as several in the crowd. It could have been another front page news story.



Instead, the officer — and his fellows in law enforcement who arrived to provide backup during the ordeal — managed to diffuse the situation and arrest two people who had assaulted the officer.

On the evening of September 2, Officer Caleb Johnson (shown) was on patrol in Madison, Wisconsin, where he serves as a “neighborhood officer” when he noticed a large crowd gathering and what looked like the beginning of a disturbance. He approached the group and saw a woman punch a man in the face. Behind her back was a can of pepper spray, which she apparently intended to use as a weapon as she continued to assault the man. When Officer Johnson attempted to arrest the woman, the crowd surrounded him. He was then attacked by both the woman and her daughter.

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As the police report states:

A concerned citizen called 911 after a crowd converged on a Madison Police officer who was trying to keep the peace following a street fight on Prairie Rd. last night.

The witness “felt the officer was in trouble,” saying it appeared someone had gone for his gun.

What began as an already tense situation had quickly escalated to the point where the officer’s life was in serious danger. His cool head and his willingness to follow his training made all the difference that night.

Before he left his patrol car to approach the crowd, Officer Johnson — an eight-year veteran of the Madison Police Department — called for backup. As the crowd’s aggression escalated, he attempted to explain what he was doing and why. Though his words had little effect on the angry crowd, they bought him time for backup to arrive.

Captain Victor Wahl of the Madison Police Department told *The New American* what happened when Officer Johnson attempted to arrest Latonya James, 40:

She began to physically resist, and then [her daughter — Nanyamka James, 20, of Madison] intervened physically. During that altercation with those two, [Officer Johnson] was punched in the head and one of the females grabbed his shirt by the collar. So there was a physical assault on him as others in the crowd surrounded them.



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It was at this point — before backup had arrived — that Officer Johnson heard some in the crowd call for the killing of police. When asked how Johnson handled the assault and threats to his life, Captain Wahl replied,

Initially he just tried to maintain control of those two [women assaulting him] while waiting for backup. He's a "neighborhood officer," so he works this area permanently and knows the people. He was trying to explain to everyone what he was doing to try to diffuse some of the hostility. Unfortunately none of that worked. He did end up taking his pepper spray out and using it to get things under control.

The officer used the pepper spray on only the two women attacking him.

Johnson has been a neighborhood officer in that part of Madison — which Captain Wahl describes as a "challenged area with criminal activity" — for "a few years." He's not a normal patrol officer, said Wahl. As part of his duties, he stays in that neighborhood and tries to build relationships with the people. He hosts bicycle repair workshops, basketball games, and other similar events there. As Wahl explained, "It makes this much more frustrating for all of us because everybody in the neighborhood knows him and should know that more than anybody, he's trying to turn things around there."

When asked about whether there was a racial element to the altercation — as both women who were arrested are black and Officer Johnson is white — Captain Wahl replied, "The other officers who ended up responding were a pretty diverse group, so it really strikes me as more of an anti-police issue than a racial issue."

Wahl related that there has been an increase in that anti-police sentiment in Madison over the past 12-18 months, in large part because of the "Ferguson factor." "I certainly think that's how the timing has been," he said. "That's what the national narrative has been. And of course we've had our incidents here. But people are much more vocal — in what they say to us sometimes — than they were maybe a year or a year and a half ago."

So, in the midst of an angry crowd — while being attacked and threatened with death — Officer Johnson and his fellow officers acted with bravery and prudence. As a result, no one was killed or seriously injured, two women were arrested, and the crowd was dispersed. That is good police work.

The older of the two women arrested does not feel that way at all. On the way to jail, she continued to threaten Officer Johnson's life. Others in her neighborhood may share her views, but some obviously feel very differently. It was, after all, one of the residents there who called 911 to report that they "felt the officer was in trouble." What's more, the official police report includes this interesting note:

A nearby resident, not involved in the melee, wanted to make sure a detective, who was investigating the incident, knew that the officer who was battered has — in the past — done a great job reaching out to residents and communicating with the neighborhood.

Captain Wahl said his department has received an "outpouring of support" from many in the community. It was, he noted, perhaps the "silver lining behind all this."



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