



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on July 29, 2020

## Politicians Versus Police: Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh is now joining the ranks of cities that are overhauling police operations following nationwide riots and protests over the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

According to the [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#), "Two requirements on police will now be written into city code: a ban on chokeholds and other neck restraints as well as a requirement for officers to intervene upon witnessing 'unreasonable force.'"



The measures were passed by unanimous vote of nine City Council members and placed into city code restrictions on neck restraints that were banned already by police use-of-force policies that allowed neck holds only if officers were "involved in a deadly force encounter."

Because the rules already existed, it seems that a legislative adoption of them is unnecessary. But, according to the *Post-Gazette*, police guidelines might change as leadership changes, so writing the rules into city code makes them rather more permanent. "Making the policies part of city code goes a step beyond the bureau's procedural manual," the paper reported.

In addition to codifying the ban on neck restraints into city code, the measures passed by the Pittsburgh City Council include funding for social-service programs.

"In an 8-1 vote, [the city] council approved matching a percentage of the police budget to fund anti-violence and social services programs. The matching obligation will be 5% in 2021 and grow to 10% by 2026." In addition, council members voted to transfer "\$250,000 from the police recruiting budget to the STOP the Violence fund" and the measures approved also request "that the mayor put a hiring freeze on new police recruits."

The council's votes come after Pittsburgh, like so many other cities, saw massive protests and riots cut a swath of destruction through downtowns and neighborhoods.

The city's local CBS News affiliate, KDKA, described the riots.

"After confrontations with police, some protesters cut a destructive swath through downtown, hitting more than 70 businesses, breaking storefront windows and looting," the station [reported](#).

In the wake of the riots, Pittsburgh police union president Robert Swartzwelder said the city was understaffed and unable to react appropriately to the violent mob.

"We were woefully unprepared. I think we underestimated the situation. I think you will hear that not only from myself but anyone who speaks to you truthfully," Swartzwelder said according to KDKA.

At one point during the violent riots, a panicked "stampede" occurred that led to nine police officers and two "demonstrators" being injured. Rioters blamed police, and the city's Democratic mayor, Bill Peduto, seemed to agree, or at least didn't outright disagree with that sentiment. In a [statement issued on June 3](#) following the events, the mayor said: "Without question, there is a difference of opinion about what happened that day and the appropriateness of the actions of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police." The mayor then requested an independent investigation be conducted by the Office of Municipal



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Investigations along with a simultaneous investigation by the Citizen Police Review Board in conjunction with the ACLU, the NAACP Pittsburgh Branch, and the U.S. Attorney's office.

Will such an investigation be fair to the police?

It is difficult to know for sure, but consider the letter Mayor Peduto sent to the Office of Municipal Investigations. In the letter, the mayor lists the violent crimes committed before the police responded with less than lethal force to try to quell the uprising. [According to the mayor](#), those crimes were:

- Sneaker Villa door smashed with rocks. Entry denied by bars.
- Photographer attacked. Tried to steal cameras
- Small mulch area lit on fire
- Attempted window smash at shoe store. Stopped by other protestors
- Another cameraman assaulted
- Dollar Bank window smashed. No entry.
- TV Cameraman chased out of the area
- PBP assaulted with bottles and projectiles

Minutes after the police responded to these events, the mayor admits the following crimes occurred:

- PBP pelted with rocks and bottles.
- EMS Physician van vandalized.
- Fire set in road at 5700 Baum Boulevard
- PBP pelted with rocks and projectiles

Clearly, all of these are threats to life and limb and property, and are certainly nuisances and a danger to the public. Looting, arson, theft, assault, and vandalism are all crimes. The police would have been criminally negligent themselves had they not responded. Yet in his letter requesting an investigation by the OMI, the mayor specifically requested an attempt to find out if the police committed crimes.

"Please provide a review and evidence of the reported crimes that occurred during and after this march," the mayor asked, adding: "This list should include any and all reports of inappropriate Police actions or other crimes reported by the public."

Pat Knepp, vice president of the Pittsburgh Fraternal Order of Police, responded by letter to the mayor's actions.

"Mayor Peduto and his #2 Dan Gilman had a press conference yesterday to promote themselves politically with reforms, but never spoke about the officers injured or quelling the violence destroying our city. This action undermines our organization," Knepp wrote.

He also asked: "How does hurling frozen bottles of water, bricks, and IEDs made from fireworks bring justice? How does tagging or trashing businesses bring justice? We have 11 officers injured so far. Multiple concussions, broken bones, cuts, and abrasions are the injuries."

Police have a difficult and dangerous and crucially important job, and as public servants their actions should be as transparent as possible to the public that employs them. Nonetheless, when in the midst of a melee that is destroying property and putting lives at risk, as described by Officer Knepp, police need to have the ability to feel capable of acting to uphold the law and stop the crimes from occurring. This includes stopping violent riots. Knowing that they will have their every action and motive questioned after the fact by politicians is chilling and can lead to demoralized police failing to intervene when crimes are being committed.



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This demoralization was evident in Knepp's letter to the mayor:

I have served my country in the military, and I have fought, defended, saved, helped, and bled for citizens, and my fellow brothers and sisters of all races, religions, genders, and sexual preferences in Pittsburgh for 26 years. I have been injured and needed surgeries protecting the citizens of Pittsburgh. I have been recognized nationally for my actions. Mayor Peduto and Dan Gilman have you?

I, the VP of the FOP, ran back and forth during the Tree of Life mass shooting to keep you informed, but now you say we are the problem and accuse a member of lying. What gall!

You talk about unity and police sacrifice when monsters are stopped, but paint your own officers with a broad brush when officers in Minneapolis are charged with murder.

I learned as a 21-year-old Sergeant in the U.S Army a huge part of leadership is trust and accountability. I believe your actions currently have eroded those characteristics.

If you want to see the end of law and order and the destruction of peace and prosperity, demoralizing the police that enforce the laws that protect lives, liberty, and property is a sure means to achieving that end.



*Image: Prathaan/iStock/Getty Images Plus*

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