

## National

*'There's such a small number of people who want to do this and an infinitesimally smaller number of people we actually want doing this.'*

# Amid soaring crime, Memphis cops lowered the bar for hiring

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Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Beyond the beating, kicking, cursing and pepper spraying, the video of Tyre Nichols' deadly arrest at the hands of young Memphis police officers is just as notable for what's missing — any experienced supervisors showing up to stop them.

That points to a dangerous confluence of trends that Memphis' police chief acknowledged have dogged the department as the city became one of the nation's murder hot spots: a chronic shortage of officers, especially supervisors, increasing numbers of police quitting and a struggle to bring in qualified recruits.

Former Memphis police recruiters told The Associated Press of a growing desperation to fill hundreds of slots in recent years that drove the department to increase incentives and lower its standards.

"They would allow just pretty much anybody to be a police officer because they just want these numbers," said Alvin Davis, a former lieutenant in charge of recruiting before he retired last year out of frustration. "They're not ready for it."

The department offered new recruits \$15,000 signing bonuses and \$10,000 relocation allowances while phasing out requirements to have either college credits, military service or previous police work. All that's now required is two years' work experience — any work experience. The department also sought state waivers to hire applicants with criminal records. And the police

academy even dropped timing requirements on physical fitness drills and removed running entirely because too many people were failing.

"I asked them what made you want to be the police and they'll be honest — they'll tell you it's strictly about the money," Mr. Davis said, adding that many recruits would ask the minimum time they would actually have to serve to keep the bonus money. "It's not a career for them like it was to us. It's just a job."

Another former patrol officer-turned-recruiter who recently left the department told the AP that in addition to drawing from other law enforcement agencies and college campuses, recruits were increasingly coming from jobs at the McDonald's and Dunkin' drive-thrus.

In one case, a stripper submitted an application. And even though she didn't get hired, it reinforced the message that "anyone can get this job. You could have any type of experience and be the police."

"There were red flags," said the former recruiter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss personnel and hiring. "But we're so far down the pyramid nobody really hears the little person."

Many young officers, before ever walking a beat with more experienced colleagues, found themselves thrust into specialized units like the now-disbanded SCORPION high-crime strike force involved in Nichols' arrest. Their lack of experience was shocking to veterans, who said some young officers who transfer back to patrol don't even know how to write a traffic ticket or respond to a domestic call.

"They don't know a felony



Gerald Herbert/Associated Press

Memphis Police Director Cerelyn Davis says the department is investigating why a supervisor failed to respond to the Tyre Nichols arrest.

from a misdemeanor," Mr. Davis said. "They don't even know right from wrong yet."

Of the five SCORPION team officers now charged with second-degree murder in Nichols' Jan. 7 beating, two had only a couple of years on the force and none had more than six years' experience.

One of the officers, Emmitt Martin III, 30, a former tight end on the Bethel University football team, appeared to have had at least one arrest, according to files from the Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission, a state oversight agency. But the date and details of the case were blacked out.

The section for arrests in the agency's file for another officer, Demetrius Haley, 30, who worked at a Shelby County Corrections facility before joining the force, was

also redacted from the state records. Haley was sued for allegedly beating an inmate there, which he denied, and the case was dismissed because papers had not been properly served.

"If you lower standards, you can predict that you're going to have problems because we're recruiting from the human race," said Ronal Serpas, the former head of the police in Nashville and New Orleans and the Washington State Patrol. "There's such a small number of people who want to do this and an infinitesimally smaller number of people we actually want doing this."

Memphis, in many ways, stands as a microcosm of the myriad crises facing American policing. Departments from Seattle to New Orleans are struggling to fill their ranks with qualified officers

amid a national movement of mounting scrutiny and calls for reform in the wake of the 2020 killing of George Floyd.

Boosting staffing was a major goal of Memphis police Director Cerelyn Davis when she took over in June 2021, with her department announcing it was aiming to increase staff from 2,100 to 2,500, close to the size of the force a decade ago. Instead, the police ranks have dropped to 1,939 officers — like the city, majority Black — even as the population has increased and the number of homicides topped 300 in each of the past two years.

A big part of the reason for the dwindling ranks is that more than 1,350 officers either resigned or retired over the past decade — more than 300 in the last two years alone.

In an interview with the

AP last week, Chief Davis said a lack of supervisors was a particular concern, noting that 125 new supervisor slots have been approved by the city but still not filled.

Chief Davis said the department is investigating, among other things, why a supervisor failed to respond to Nichols' arrest despite department policy that requires a ranking officer when pepper spray or a stun gun has been deployed.

"If that had happened somebody could have been there to intercept what happened," Chief Davis said.

"Culture eats policy for lunch in police departments," she added. "If you don't have the checks and balances you will have problems."

Michael Williams, former head of the Memphis Police Association, the officers' union, said strict supervision is essential, especially for the specialized teams like SCORPION.

"Why would you have an elite task force that you know is designed for aggressive policing and you don't cover your bases? They may have to shoot someone. They may have to kick someone's door down. They may have to physically restrain someone," Mr. Williams said.

Thaddeus Johnson, a former Memphis police officer who is now a criminal justice professor at Georgia State University, said the missed chance for federal intervention allowed the problems of the department — soaring crime, community distrust and chronic understaffing — to fester until they exploded.

"A deadly brew came together," he said. "But that same mixture is in many other places, too, where the bubble just hasn't burst yet."







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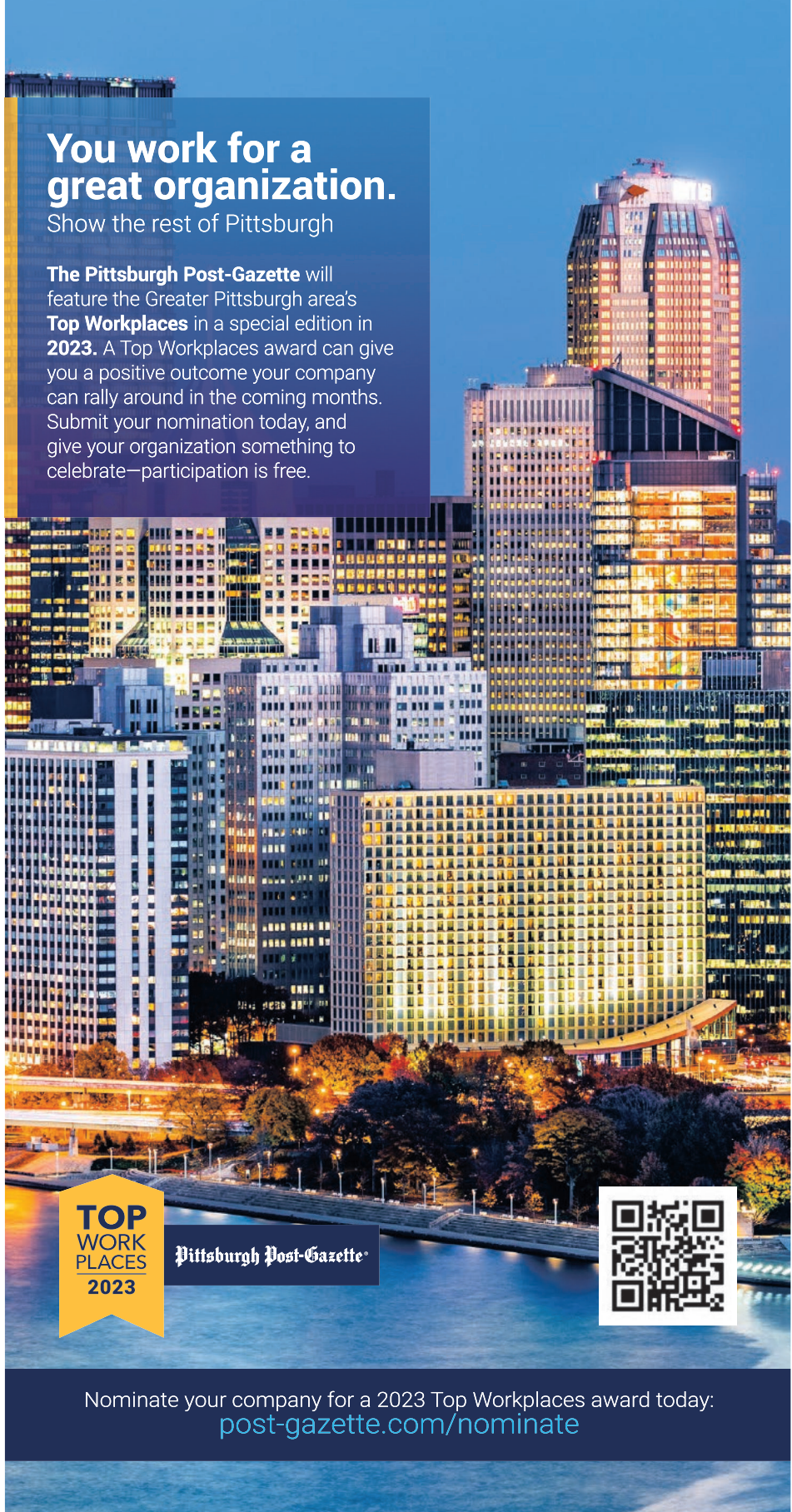
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