

Questions for Dr. Alexes Harris

To be clear, the course I'm talking about here is entitled, "The Criminal Legal System: Structural Inequities, Monetary Sanctions, Policy and Reform." It is currently offered at the Criminal Justice Training Center in Burien, and I assume elsewhere, as a way for Washington state law enforcement officers to fulfill their certification requirements as per the Washington Administrative Code.

WAC 139-11-020 Requirements of training for law enforcement.

(1) Beginning December 7, 2019, all new general authority peace officers must complete a minimum of two hundred hours of initial violence de-escalation and mental health training in the basic law enforcement academy (BLEA). Violence de-escalation and mental health training will include the following topics:

[. . .]

(r) examining alternatives to jail booking an arrest and the impact on members of the community and public safety.

Questions

- 1) Is there a place online or elsewhere that I can take this training myself?
- 2) An underlying assumption of the Structural Inequities course, as I see it, is that black and brown people's involvement with the criminal justice system is impacted by structural racism. If that is true, what specific implications does it have for how individual police officers should treat the black and brown citizens they engage with? Should they not arrest or question a black or brown person whom they believe has committed a crime, for example? Should they treat arrestees differently based on their skin color? That question is not addressed in the training, but it's something trainees would seem to need in order to make sense of the training.
- 3) Would you describe yourself as a police abolitionist? If so, what does that term mean to you?
- 4) Do you support "defunding" the police? If so, what does that term mean to you?
- 5) Any law enforcement officer who does patrol is required to engage with, and sometimes arrest, citizens. Did you work with any patrol officers in Seattle or elsewhere in Washington as you were developing this training? If so, what did they contribute to the training? If not, why not?
- 6) Some of the material presented in the course is controversial. One of the complaints I heard was that the material is presented as scientific fact rather than social theory.

Online quizzes are given during the course of the training, quizzes that had to be "passed" for the training to continue. Whether you intended it or not, the quiz format sends a signal to the trainee that the course material is factual and that refusing to give the "right" answer implies that the trainee is denying "the facts." I understand that there are limitations to the amount of interactivity that can be included in an online course, but can you see how that might be an obstacle to people keeping an open mind about the training? Would you be willing to look at ways to make the course more interactive? If so, how might you do that?

- 7) The officer I spoke with said there was no survey given after the class by which the trainees can evaluate the material. Was that by design? Can you see how that too might be an obstacle to people's willingness to keep an open mind about the material? Please give me your thoughts.
- 8) Do you have a metric by which you judge whether this course is having any effect on the behavior of law enforcement officers? If so, what is that metric?
- 9) In a King 5 interview airing in 2020, you said that modern law enforcement (which of course includes policing) evolved out of slavery and the slave catchers or the pre-Civil War era¹, yet the first three full-time municipal police forces in the U.S. were created in Boston in 1838, New York City in 1845, Albany, NY and Chicago in 1851² –all in free states. Do you still believe there's a relationship between the slave catchers of the antebellum South and law enforcement officers in Washington today? If so, how do you incorporate that belief to your trainings? Please describe.

Thanks for your consideration here, Professor Harris. I'm sure your answers will make my post on this topic more useful.

–David Preston

Notes:

1. <https://www.king5.com/article/news/community/facing-race/uw-alexes-harris-race-policing/281-1c570b71-95bf-410e-89b3-01fad2cf3e04>
2. <https://ekuonline.eku.edu/blog/police-studies/the-history-of-policing-in-the-united-states-part-1/>