

13 excessive force complaints against Minneapolis police officer involved in Terrence Franklin shooting

Lucas Peterson, a highly decorated officer, faces scrutiny for fatal Uptown shooting.

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Kyndell Harkness

The scene near 27th Street and Bryant Avenue S., where two Minneapolis police officers were shot and a man was shot and killed.

A woman claimed a police officer slammed her head against a wall, punched and kicked her in the torso. A man said he was beaten with a flashlight. A woman blamed an officer for restraining her boyfriend so violently that it killed him.

Each of these people allege misconduct by Minneapolis police officer Lucas Peterson, a decorated cop who joined the force in 2000. Since then, he has been named in at least 13 excessive force complaints that so far have cost the city and other agencies more than \$700,000 in settlements, court and city records show.

His supervisors and fellow officers praise Peterson as a courageous and exemplary cop. Court records offer a different view — an officer whose aggressive methods frequently cross the line.

The actions of Peterson and other officers have come under scrutiny as the Hennepin County attorney's office reviews whether police were justified in shooting Terrence Franklin in the basement of an Uptown house May 10. Two officers were wounded by gunfire in that confrontation.

Sources said Peterson was the one who shot and killed Franklin, whose death prompted protest marches and pressure on Chief Janeé Harteau to release more details on the deadly encounter.

Since 2006, the city has settled nine claims involving Peterson, more than any other officer over the past seven years.

“It’s very clear that this officer, over a period of time now, is not what this force needs, and it puts a black eye on the force and a black eye on the city,” said Brett Buckner, a former Minneapolis NAACP official who called for Peterson’s firing 11 years ago.

Peterson’s work history includes a letter of reprimand from 2008 for a policy violation, according to a department spokesperson. No further information was immediately available. His personnel file also reveals an officer revered by his peers and supervisors.

He was named the officer of the year for the Fourth Precinct, which covers the city’s North Side, in 2009, 2010 and 2012. He has twice been awarded the department’s Medal of Valor, most recently last month.

“He’s kind of, in my opinion, what we wish every cop could be,” said John Delmonico, president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis. Delmonico said he’s known Peterson since he was a kid growing up in south Minneapolis. Peterson’s grandfather, father and uncle were all police officers. “Clearly it’s in the family blood,” Delmonico said.

As for the city’s payouts, Delmonico said there’s no correlation between the city’s decision to settle a case and the police officer’s guilt. Each of the cases was reviewed by the department’s internal affairs unit. Cases may also get reviewed by the Hennepin County attorney’s office, a grand jury and, if civil rights allegations are made, the FBI.

“I’m confident there [were] good checks and balances to determine if it was misconduct or not,” he said.

In the Franklin case, said Delmonico, “if Luke Peterson is the one who shot [Franklin], then he is a hero because he stopped him from shooting cops.”

Harteau and Peterson did not respond to requests for comment.

Peterson, who became a Minneapolis police officer on Oct. 22, 2000, started out on the night shift in Southwest and then south Minneapolis, according to his personnel file. He was named to the Metro Gang Strike Force in 2006, but was one of the officers investigated three years later when the state Department of Public Safety shut the force down amid allegations that Strike Force members conducted improper searches, seized property without authorization and injured people who were not suspects. The unit’s actions led to a \$3 million settlement for victims of Strike Force misconduct.

Peterson’s work investigating gangs in north Minneapolis helped the department make several big arrests, according to his personnel file. He was first named the Fourth Precinct officer of the year in 2009. The first award cited Peterson’s work, saying his street contacts helped police stop a gang shooting; capture a violent felon who had kidnapped, raped and tortured a woman; and led to the capture of a St. Paul drug dealer and gang member who had two handguns, a hand grenade, 9 kilos of marijuana and \$3,300 in cash.

He also acted quickly in the fall of 2009, using contacts he had developed to find a wanted felon who had escaped police hours earlier after pointing a gun at a Minneapolis police officer. That incident won him praise from the department’s top leadership, including Harteau, then the deputy chief.

He was awarded the Medal of Valor in 2006 for helping two other officers pursue a violent burglary suspect, who stabbed an officer and was killed by another. He won it again May 13 for actions in 2012.

“Luke has been a great performer for the MPD,” said Tim Dolan, who was Minneapolis chief from 2006 to 2012.

Attorney Kenneth Udoibok said in the last four years, Peterson “stands out” as a cop who is not afraid to use force, at times excessive.

Udoibok sued Peterson in 2011 on behalf of Bill Dumas, who claimed the officer, as part of the Strike Force, kicked and punched him when he was face down on the ground. The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust settled the case for \$15,000.

“He’s not the only cop going out and putting himself in these high-risk situations,” Udoibok said. “But they don’t get sued.”

In a complaint filed by Symone Taylor in 2006, Taylor alleges Peterson “slammed” her “head into the side of the building, causing injury to her head, cheek, and face. Plaintiff Taylor was further beaten, assaulted, thrown to the ground and viciously kicked in the torso and back.” The case was settled in 2009 for \$15,000.

In 2006, Peterson and officer Mark Kaspszak struggled with Derrick Simmons after a traffic stop, according to a lawsuit filed by Johnson. Peterson wrote in a police report that Nancy Johnson, Simmons’ partner, jumped on a police officer’s back as he fought with Simmons, but a surveillance camera later showed Johnson didn’t touch the officers. The city settled the two claims for \$100,000.

Stephen Smith, Johnson’s attorney, was shocked that Peterson was still on the force. “At least slap him on the wrist,” Smith said. “But I suppose I was assuming too much.”

In 2002, the Minneapolis NAACP called for the firing of Peterson and officer Mark Johnson after the death of Christopher Burns. On Nov. 1 of that year, the officers had responded to a reported domestic dispute between Burns and his fiancée, Bernadine McWhorter, when they put him in a neck hold that led to cardiac arrest, the complaint said. The Hennepin County medical examiner ruled Burns’ death a homicide. In 2003, a grand jury determined that the officer’s use of a neck hold was appropriate to subdue Burns, but in 2007, the city paid \$300,000 to settle the excessive force lawsuit filed by McWhorter.

Buckner, then the NAACP second vice president, told the Star Tribune at the time that “another black man has been killed at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department.”

Now he’s running for the City Council’s 5th Ward seat. Buckner said, if elected, his first question to the chief would be about Peterson: “How soon is his locker going to get cleared out?”

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