

Some Young Fresnans Remain Skeptical Of Police Outreach

By Jeffrey
Hess



A police instructor explains to 15-year old Raymond Rojas how the simulator works.

Credit Jeffrey Hess / Valley Public Radio

Listen

Listening...

4:12

In Fresno tonight, police officers and teenagers will meet to look for ways to build trust and bridging the gap between them. The violent protests in Baltimore have thrust the issue dramatically back into the spotlight. Outreach to young people in Fresno is being pitched as essential to improving relations between police and the people they are supposed to protect.

Standing in a dark room, on a platform surrounded by eight-foot tall projection screens is a skinny 15-year old named Raymond Rojas.

A police instructor explains that he is in the role of a police officer with a tazer and a pistol that will interact with the scenario he is about to engage with on the screens.

Rojas tries to talk to a man illegally dumping trash off the back of his truck.

But when he attempts to taze the man and misses, the man reaches for a gun and fires...killing the boy.

"their minds are being slanted in certain ways by social media. And we have to make sure that we are getting our message out to them," Police Chief Jerry Dyer

Rojas was one of roughly thirty teenagers to go through a police simulator in an attempt to give the students a chance to see what it is like to be a cop.

It is part of an effort Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer is taking to try to improve the image and relationship of officers in the field with young people.

“The message has to be to everyone in the community but I do believe we need to focus on our youth today. Because our youth that are in many ways having their minds...not tainted...but their minds are being slanted in certain ways by social media. And we have to make sure that we are getting our message out to them,” Dyer said.

The meeting and simulator experience was arranged by the group Build Healthy Communities.

Ceaser Rodriguez with Fresno Men and Boys of Color echoes the police chief saying there needs to be a more honest dialog between police and young people.

“If we are not listening to each other we are not really doing anything. It is all about collaboration and cooperation because a lot of the issues facing our community are really going to take all of us and are really going to take some leadership from young people. So that this can be sustainable and really build Fresno from here on out,” Rodriguez said.

Demonstrations, protests and riots over police behavior have been roiling the country for a year and have re-kindled with the violence in Baltimore.

Chief Dyer and community leaders say this type of outreach could prevent that from happening in Fresno.

“This is not something that is going to change with a few simple speeches, handshakes, and smiles,” 15-year-old Raymond Rojas

But they have a lot of work to do according to 15-year old Raymond Rojas.

After leaving the simulator, he says the experience was fun and somewhat enlightening.

“I never expected that man to have a gun just lying there ready to shoot me and just like that I was dead. And that would have been a real situation and the officer did what I did or did something else and the man didn’t comply he could have easily taken another man’s life,” Rojas said.

But Rojas remains skeptical that it’s very helpful saying officers aren’t taking the time to think about what it is like to be a Hispanic teenager in the city and are responsible for their own bad image.

“If you were to interview teens, probably 70 out of 100 would say ‘F a cop. I’ll shoot a cop’. Basically that’s it. They call them piggies, bacon, all kinds of stuff. But that is just because of the negativity and different problems that are happening toward teenagers and different ethnicities,” Rojas said.

Rojas says he has friends who have been roughed up by cops including one with a scar on his head from being kicked with a boot.

The biggest problem, according to Rojas, is the sense that police officers are not held to account when the abuse or mistreat people.

“I guess it wouldn’t be so bad if repercussions happen to them. Because if another man was to choke an officer and he died? That man would be in prison for life. An officer choked a man to death...so it’s hard for me to feel like they are my equal when stuff like that happens,” Rojas said.

Without some substantive change, Rojas says the simulators, meetings and speeches won’t mean much to young people.

“This is not something that a speech can change. This has to be brought to attention and there has to be a movement against it. This is not something that is going to change with a few simple speeches, handshakes, and smiles,” Rojas said.

Police Chief Dyer says the department is changing, pointing to declines in officer-involved shootings and citizen complaints.

He says he is not just relying on outreach and is in the process of putting body cameras on all their officers this year, which he thinks will help tell a more complete picture of policing in Fresno.