US policing

'I didn't think I'd survive': women tell of hidden sexual abuse by Phoenix police

The city's police department has a history of sexual abuse cases. Studies suggest such misconduct is rampant in the US.

-born image of a woman looking out a window.

▲ JeAnna Anderson said when she was pulled over in 2015 for a registration issue, the officer sexually assaulted her, then arrested her. Photograph: Callaghan O'Hare/The Guardian

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Mon 10 Aug 2020 08.00 EDT

Note: this piece contains accounts that may be triggering for survivors of sexual assault.

Within seconds, JeAnna Anderson knew she didn't want to be alone with the police officer.

It was just after 10pm on 16 October 2015, and Phoenix, Arizona, officer Anthony Armour had pulled her over into a dark parking lot. The officer told...
her not to “play dumb” when she asked about the stop, and when she requested he call a supervisor so they weren’t by themselves, he declined, she said.

Once the 47-year-old woman attempted to record him with her phone, he grabbed her by the wrist, forced her out, pinned her against the car, handcuffed her and began his search – running his hands under her shirt, cupping her breast, and then moving his hands into her pockets and eventually down her pants and thigh, according to her account. As he moved her into the back of his patrol car, she thought of a Black woman like her, Sandra Bland, who was pulled over and died in custody three months prior. Anderson fainted.

“You can’t even put words to the kind of fear I was facing,” said Anderson, now 52, who was pulled over due to an issue with her car insurance and taken to jail. “I didn’t think I was going to live through it.”

**I didn’t think I was going to live through it**

JeAnna Anderson

When she later got her phone back from police, Anderson discovered that someone, probably Armour, had used her camera to take a photo of her on the ground with a male police officer standing above her, according to a lawsuit she later filed against the city that detailed her account of sexual assault.

Anderson is speaking out for the first time as the US is grappling with the deadly and racist legacy of law enforcement institutions. In the wake of the George Floyd uprisings, police in cities across the country are starting to face scrutiny, and some consequences, for using fatal force, and mayors and chiefs are pledging to restrict the violent tactics that make America an international leader in police killings.

But there has been little reckoning over one prevalent form of brutality entrenched in the culture of US law enforcement - the epidemic of sexual abuse by the police. Studies have suggested that sexual misconduct on the job is rampant with one investigation finding roughly 1,000 officers lost their badges for rape and other sexual offenses in a six-year period. But it’s likely these cases only scratch the surface of this form of state-sanctioned assault.

The Phoenix police department has one of the deadliest records in the country and a history of sexual abuse cases. Records obtained by the Guardian reveal that officer Armour has multiple assault and misconduct allegations on his record, including sexual abuse, but has only faced a temporary suspension for one incident.

**Violated, then arrested: I couldn’t breathe**

Anderson had never been arrested before that night. A longtime Phoenix resident working in healthcare credentialing, she had gone out that evening to pick up allergy medication from a pharmacy and cash from an ATM. Her Yorkshire terrier, Dallas, was in the passenger seat when Anderson heard tires squealing and saw a police SUV turn around and start trailing her.

Armour’s hostile tone immediately made her feel unsafe, she recalled: “He kept saying, ‘You know why I’m pulling you over?’ Eventually he told her
that her license was suspended. She tried to show him a motor vehicles document she had received that day about an issue with her outdated insurance, but he wasn’t interested.

Anderson wanted a witness to the encounter, but Armour refused to call anyone. Filming was her last option, but she wasn’t able to press the record button in time, she said.

Anderson immediately felt excruciating pain “like a lightning strike” as Armour twisted her arm backward and dragged her out. She cried as he started groping her and then fell silent. “I had lost total control of the situation,” she said.

In the police car, she recalled suffering panic attacks and collapsing face forward. “I said, ‘I can’t breathe,’” she recalled, noting that other officers showed up to the scene. No one seemed to take her health concerns seriously, even though paramedics arrived to treat her elevated blood pressure. “They were like, ‘Stop faking it. You’re going to jail.’”

While she was sitting on the curb in custody waiting for a friend to arrive to get her dog, Dallas came up to her and licked the tears off her face. She pleaded not to be taken alone with Armour, but the officer drove her away to the Phoenix jail.

Anderson was booked for resisting arrest, threatened with a six-month sentence and $2,500 fine.

**Hundreds of cases: ‘An ideal system for sexual violence’**

Between 2005 and 2015, there were 517 cases of forcible rape by police in the US, according to Philip Stinson, a Bowling Green State University criminal justice professor. An officer is accused of sexual misconduct, the second most common complaint against officers, at least once every five days in the US, according to one analysis.

“When people read a story in the paper about an officer charged with a sex crime, they think it’s one officer, it’s horrible, it can’t happen much,” said Stinson. “It’s not until you aggregate it all that you realize this is a phenomenon. It’s far beyond ‘bad apples’.”

Police typically target the most vulnerable people. In a seven-year period, Stinson found that half of the sexual misconduct arrests against officers involved minors. Daniel Holtclaw, a serial rapist, was convicted for targeting eight Black women in Oklahoma when he was in uniform. Officers frequently assault women of color, domestic violence victims, informants and women facing traffic stops, experts say.

“When you are pulled over by police, you have to comply or else they are legally entitled to enact severe forms of violence against you,” said Alisa
Bierria, professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside and advocate for sexual assault survivors. “It’s a system that is organized in ways that are most ideal for a person who would engage in sexual violence.”

**A history of complaints and no discipline**

In Phoenix, advocates say the same police culture that allows officers to kill with impunity has enabled officer attacks on vulnerable women.

In June, Phoenix prosecutors announced charges against officer Sean Pena, who allegedly raped one woman who he had hand cuffed and sexually assaulted another. In 2015, Phoenix officer Timothy Morris was charged with sexually assaulting a handcuffed woman, but was acquitted after he claimed it was consensual. Last year, an officer in the nearby city of Mesa was allowed to keep his badge and benefits after the city’s own investigation found a pattern of sexual harassment of civilians and female officers.

In July, the Guardian also uncovered body-camera footage showing a male officer tackling and slamming a young woman to the ground during a routine traffic stop. The department said it was justified.

Meanwhile, JeAnna Anderson is not the first woman to speak up about Armour’s conduct since he joined the department in 2006.

In 2011, a woman accused him and a colleague of pulling her over for no reason into an alley and interrogating her alone at 2.30am. In 2012, police investigated a complaint suggesting Armour had “engaged in sexual activity” with a woman he was investigating for drug offenses. That same year, Armour was investigated for an incident involving a woman who had called 911 to report a possible “prowler”, his personnel records show. When he arrived at her door, she had a knife in her hand, and Armour ended up shooting her. She survived and was charged with assault and drug possession. In February 2015, he was also accused of pushing a woman to the ground and leaving her on the concrete during an arrest. (Phoenix police reports said there were no violations, and no actions were taken.)

**On their best days, [police] show up after a harm has happened and collect evidence. On their worst days, they are committing crimes themselves**

*Heather Hamel*

A few weeks after Anderson’s arrest, Armour was again accused of barging his way into a home without authorization and arresting a woman inside. The department later concluded he was guilty of “false arrest”, unlawful entry, disobeying a supervisor and making multiple false statements. He received an 80-hour suspension.

Last year, a woman was freed from prison after it was revealed that law enforcement failed to disclose Armour’s record of lying. She spent two years behind bars.

Anderson’s prosecution dragged on for nine months until the resisting arrest charge was dropped. During that time, she was recovering from physical injuries from the arrest, including a long-term shoulder injury, according to her complaint. “When I hear the stuff he has done before I knew my gut was not lying to me,” said Anderson.
Armour has not faced any discipline in Anderson’s case. He was approved for early retirement last year at age 40 with a monthly pension of $3,143.

A Phoenix police spokeswoman, Mercedes Fortune, declined to comment on Armour’s cases, citing pending litigation. Attorneys for Armour did not respond to inquiries, but in court have said he denies her sexual assault and excessive force allegations and did not take a photo of her with her phone.

*Who do you call when your rapist is a police officer?*

For survivors, the process of reporting sexual assault by police can be harrowing.

“Who do you call when your rapist is a police officer?” said Stinson, the researcher in Ohio.

In December 2018, Phoenix police stopped Erica Reynolds as part of a drug investigation, and although they found no evidence in her car, took her to a police station. There, officers made her strip naked and conducted searches of her anal and vaginal cavities, which did not turn up any drugs. The officers did not have a warrant to search her, and last year the city concluded that the search violated policy, which says the searches require a warrant with a judge’s approval and must be conducted by a medical professional.

“I wasn’t going to allow them to get away with it,” Reynolds, 38, told the Guardian. So she immediately went to the hospital and reported it: “I tried to do the best thing I can do, and get it checked out. I said, ‘I think I was raped by police.’”

![Erica Reynolds sued the Phoenix Police after they subjected her to an illegal cavity search. Photograph: Caitlin O’Hara/Caitlin O’Hara for The Guardian](image)

The doctors did what they typically do when a patient reports sexual assault - they called the police. According to Reynolds’ complaint, the police department declined to investigate or send a forensic nurse to conduct a rape kit. Her doctors diagnosed her with “sexual assault and rectal bleeding”.

Reynolds ultimately was never charged with any drug crimes. While police acknowledged the search was out of policy and paid Reynolds a settlement, the department never acknowledged it
constituted sexual assault. “They were ready to rip my whole life apart,” she said, recounting the extensive investigations she faced as a suspect in the aftermath. “They are going to do whatever they want ... and use the ‘war on drugs’ as a cover-up.”

One officer received a 40-hour suspension, but the officials who ordered the illegal search were not punished. They all remain on duty. Phoenix police declined to answer questions about Reynolds’ case.

**How police budgets could be reinvested**
Efforts to curb police violence, including sexual assault, have repeatedly fallen short. Now, advocates are hoping the calls to defund the police could provide a new way forward.

“When we talk about defunding police, or a world without police, people have this kneejerk reaction of, ‘Who do we call to keep ourselves safe?’” said Heather Hamel, a Phoenix civil rights lawyer who represented Anderson and Reynolds. “But we need to ask ourselves if police are actually doing that. On their best days, they show up after a harm has happened and collect evidence. On their worst days, they are committing crimes themselves.”

Instead of fixing officers’ behavior, departments are dedicated to defending them and dragging victims through years-long court battles that end with the city paying settlements, Anderson noted: “If they can’t get it together, then police officers are a waste of time.”

Reynolds said it was hard not to think of all the resources police put into investigating her, assaulting her and then continuing to pursue a case against her. “They wasn’t doing no police work. How much funding do you need to come over here to pull people over?”

Advocates say funds could be reinvested in shelters, services and other programs that help victims. Meanwhile, Phoenix police have a $721m budget - and the city is currently increasing funding by $24m.

**The aftermath: ‘I just wasn’t myself any more’**
The Phoenix women’s encounters with police have had long-term impacts on their lives.

Reynolds has struggled with physical intimacy since her assault and lives in fear of police, particularly in South Phoenix, where she was raised: “I have to
stay away from where I grew up because of them,” she said. “They’ve never said we’re sorry we caused turmoil in your life.”

Anderson’s life unraveled after her assault. Her relationship fell apart. She became too anxious to drive alone at night, and shut down the fitness-wear business she was launching: “I just wasn’t myself any more. I was angry. I was always hurt. There would be times I would be afraid to leave my house.” At one point, she ended up living in a women’s shelter.

Anderson eventually left Phoenix. “The fear just wouldn’t go away and I said I need to leave, I don’t deserve to live like this,” said Anderson, who moved to Texas in February. While it’s been easier to recover away from Phoenix police, she said the incident sometimes feels like “it maybe happened a week ago”.

She’s hoping that more women will come forward. “I am only one woman, but more people need to fight. Police officers are supposed to serve and protect, but there was no one there to protect me that night.”

In the US, Rann offers support at 800-656-4673 or by chat at www.rainn.org. In the UK, Supportline can be reached at 01708 765200. In Australia, support is available at 1800Respect (1800 737 732) or www.1800respect.org.au. Other international helplines can be found at www.ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html.

**America faces an epic choice…**

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