

Female voice: A listener note: this episode contains audio from a traffic stop.

Narrator Eleanor Klibanoff: It was early August, 2018, when Tae-Ahn Lea decided to go run some errands. Lea had recently graduated from high school. He'd been Homecoming King, and was working at a car dealership. But this was his day off — so he got in the car and drove over to Thornton's gas station.

Tae-Ahn Lea: I got my chips, my slushy and I called my mother because I didn't know how to get money out the ATM. [quiet laughter from an audience] So I didn't know to click withdrawal, checking, savings.

Narrator: Tae-Ahn Lea was 18 years old, baby-faced and soft-spoken, the kind of 18 who makes you realize how young that really is. He lived in Park Duvalle, in the West End.

Narrator: At the gas station, he saw a police officer in an unmarked car eyeing him, and he got nervous.

Tae-Ahn Lea: He stared at me. At that moment, I felt uncomfortable. He gave me the look like it's going to be a problem.

Narrator: Lea is testifying to the Louisville Metro Council about this incident. He says he told his mom on the phone about the police officer.

Tae-Ahn Lea: She told me you have nothing to worry about, you ain't doing nothing wrong.

Narrator: By the time Lea left the gas station, though, there were several police officers there.

Tae-Ahn Lea: To pull out, you have to pull out in front of traffic. But I mean, it's not illegal. But I take a different way because I don't want to give them even no reason to pull me over. So I take a different way to go home. So. When I take that way, not even five seconds, I look at my mirror and that officer's behind me.

Narrator: Body camera footage shows Louisville Metro Police Detective Kevin Crawford tailing Lea's orange Dodge Charger. You see Lea's blinker light up as the car makes a right-hand turn — and then the sirens start.

[noise of sirens from the body camera/traffic stop runs under Tae-Ahn Lea's testimony]

Tae-Ahn Lea: My mom taught me to put my hands on the steering wheel, don't reach for nothing, keep your insurance up here, if you don't have your license out, you know, don't even reach for it...due to recent videos and encounters with other black men and officers, shootings and everything like that.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: "You know what I'm stopping you for?"

Tae-Ahn Lea: He came to the car and approached me like, you know, friendly. 'Hey bud, you know why I pulled you over?' So I didn't know why. I trusted him and I reached for my license and gave my insurance.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: When you turned on here, onto Dixie, or 18th street, you turned into the far left lane, supposed to turn into the right lane... see how there's two lanes? That's the reason why...are there any weapons in your car, no drugs, do you have your ID?

Narrator: The detective says he just took the turn too wide —

Tae-Ahn Lea: And that's when my mother had called me.

[Audio of cell phone ringing]

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: That's a crazy ringtone.

BODY CAMERA/LEA, to mother: Yeah, I'm pulled over

Narrator: Lea speaks briefly to his mother. He tells her he's been pulled over, and then puts her on speaker phone — another precaution.

Narrator: Detective Kevin Crawford is being exceedingly polite. But as soon as Lea has his mom on the phone, Crawford takes things to the next level.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Put your hands on the steering wheel.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: What are you opening up the door for?

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Do me a favor, grab your phone.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Why?

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Because I'm telling you or it's gonna fall out when you get out of the vehicle.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Why? Why are you taking me out of the vehicle? Mama, they taking me out of the vehicle

Narrator: He turns Lea around, puts his hands on the car and starts patting him down.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: I haven't did anything, why are you checking me?

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: I didn't say you did anything.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Why'd you take me out of the car?

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Do you have any drugs or weapons —

BODY CAMERA/LEA: I don't — I told you that when you asked the first time

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Ok, do you mind if I check

BODY CAMERA/LEA: I do mind

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Ok, awesome, I'm going to make sure you don't have any weapons.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: No —

BODY CAMERA/DETECTIVE HELLARD: Yeah.

Narrator: That's Crawford's partner, Detective Gabe Hellard, telling Lea that they're allowed to get him out of the car and pat him down.

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: Yeah, we're allowed to pat you down for weapons.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Mama, they're patting me down.

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: Yup, we're allowed to do that.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: You fuckin took me out of the car.

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: We're allowed to do that.

Narrator: Crawford keeps asking Lea if he can search his car. Lea keeps saying no. He's getting frustrated —

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: Quit doing the clenching your fist thing, too.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: This is some bullshit.

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: What's bullcrap?

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Fuckin only day I have off, I want to go home

BODY CAMERA/ CRAWFORD: OK, unfortunately you did a traffic violation right in front of us, so do me a favor, hang tight, I'm going to talk to my canine partner.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Ok, whatever.

Narrator: This 18-year-old kid is nervously complaining about being stopped. Detective Hellard — an adult, who is armed, and has all the power in this situation — he doesn't like that.

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: Quit with the attitude, he's not giving you an attitude and I'm not giving you an attitude.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: I understand that.

BODY CAMERA/ HELLARD: We deal with violent crime all day every day, we're going to stop 30 more people after you. As soon as you get done here, you'll go home, OK? If you're wasting our time, or we're wasting your time, I'm sorry for the small inconvenience. We're allowed to get people out of the car. Your heart is beating through your chest, when you're on the phone with your mama, and you're narrating to your mama, 'Mama, I'm stopped by the police, this is where I'm at, they're getting me out of the car, oh my gosh.' When you do all that, it's the same thing people do when they're trying to hide something from the police and they're trying to take the situation off of it.

Narrator: While Hellard is delivering this lecture, Crawford gets the K-9 unit involved. The dog walks around the exterior and, apparently, detects something.

BODY CAMERA/K9 OFFICER: "Canine indication at 18:10,

ONE OF THE DETECTIVES: Is it positive?

BODY CAMERA/K9 OFFICER: Yeah.

Narrator: That's all the justification they need to search the car. The detectives put Lea in handcuffs.

BODY CAMERA/DETECTIVE: Put your hands behind your back real quick.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Mama!

BODY CAMERA/DETECTIVE: The dog indicated on your vehicle. I don't know what's in your car, but like I said, I don't want you to run, you're still just being detained, you're not free to go but you're not under arrest at this time, I just don't want you to go anywhere, OK? But I'm not gonna fight you, and I'm certainly not gonna chase you.

Narrator: But once the dog gets inside the car — he's not finding anything. Crawford pats Lea down, reaching in his pockets and feeling around his sweatpants. He gets nothing. They run a criminal check — nothing.

DISPATCHER OVER RADIO: Your subject Tae-Ahn Lea has come back clear.

Narrator: Crawford starts writing Lea up for a traffic violation. But they keep him handcuffed, on the side of a busy thoroughfare in his neighborhood. An officer has emptied out his car. A dog is digging around in it — all because of a wide turn — a thing *I* didn't even realize was illegal until I saw this video back in 2018 — a thing *I as a white woman* have never been stopped for.

Narrator: It's at this moment that Detective Hellard decides to have some real talk with Tae-Ahn Lea.

BODY CAMERA/HELLARD: Why do you ha... if you don't mind me asking, why do you have, like, this negative view towards the police? What's ever happened in your life personally where you're like... can you give me a good explanation?...

BODY CAMERA/LEA: Absolutely nothing.

BODY CAMERA/HELLARD: Really?

BODY CAMERA/LEA: I graduated, I got a good ass job.

BODY CAMERA/HELLARD: Right.

BODY CAMERA/LEA: I graduated with three full-ride (unintelligible) scholarships, I never did shit in my life, I been in the house all day.

BODY CAMERA/HELLARD: So what's the problem? Why are we in this situation?

BODY CAMERA/LEA: YOU!

Narrator: Hellard asks — why are we in this situation? Tae-Ahn Lea responds — YOU.

Narrator: This is 2018. Just two years prior, Police Chief Steve Conrad had stood in a conference room and explained his department's commitment to community policing, trust,

legitimacy and procedural justice — this idea that when you have an interaction with the police
—

Chief Conrad: You come away from that interaction or come away with that feeling like you were treated fairly. You may still have a ticket. You may still be arrested. But you felt like that officer treated you with dignity and with respect.

Narrator: What the hell happened to this Model City in those two years — to go from touting procedural justice to getting a canine unit involved after an 18-year-old takes a turn too wide?

This is Dig, Season Two: The Model City, from the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Newsy. I'm Eleanor Klibanoff.

Narrator: I told you last episode about the community forums the police department hosted in 2016, where they laid out their plans to implement 21st Century Policing. Those were low-key affairs — folding chairs, spotty AV service, peanut butter crackers.

<<forum intro music up>>

Narrator: But around the same time, across town, there was another forum — the Louisville Forum — a monthly lunch event where movers and shakers gather to discuss important issues
—

[Fade up, sound of silverware clinking plates, din of a restaurant] FORUM HOST: We meet on the second Wednesday of every month at Vincenzo's Restaurant.

Narrator: Vincenzo's is a white tablecloth restaurant with a dress code in its dining room. Guests pay \$25 a seat for this event.

FORUM HOST: The forum hosted debates and discussions of contemporary and sometimes controversial public policy issues that affect the greater Louisville community."

Narrator: In July 2016, the Louisville Forum hosted LMPD Chief Steve Conrad. But unlike those *other* community forums, Conrad wasn't there to get people on board with 21st Century Policing. He was there to talk about fighting crime — and specifically, the city's rising homicide numbers.

Chief Conrad: Last year, we had 80 people killed in our community, the most we've seen killed since 1980. And I am so worried that if the trend continues this year, we could find ourselves topping that...My goal is to stop it and to do whatever we can to stop it.

Narrator: Conrad didn't stop it. Louisville saw 117 homicides that year — at that point, the most in decades. The homicide surge touched every corner of the city, but it hit the West End particularly hard.

[Montage comes up of news clips about homicides]

Narrator: So in 2016 — Louisville was trying to tackle two problems simultaneously — rising homicide numbers — and diminished trust between police and citizens, which had come into sharp focus after Ferguson.

Narrator: The good news is — these two goals don't have to be at odds with each other. You can fight crime while building community trust. In fact, a lot of 21st Century Policing is built on the premise that the police can ONLY effectively fight crime when they have trust and legitimacy in the eyes of the community.

Narrator: That's what Conrad said at the community forum— the peanut butter crackers forum, not the white tablecloth one —

Chief Conrad: If we cannot work hard enough to earn your trust, we're going to have an awfully hard time making Louisville a safer city and making it the place where you all want to be.

Narrator: We know what Louisville was doing to tackle the community trust problem. They were embracing the tenets of 21st Century Policing — overhauling training — promising to build community relationships — starting the Clergy Police Academy — bringing DJ Justice out to fairs and festivals.

Narrator: But to get a handle on the rising crime numbers — Louisville took a different approach — though, one that would seem fairly familiar to some in the West End.

Narrator: For a few years prior to this, LMPD had a unit called VIPER — the Violent Incident Prevention Enforcement and Response Unit. These 30 or so plain-clothes detectives became known for aggressive traffic stops and officer scandals.

Narrator: In June 2015, a group of protesters marched to police headquarters downtown and posted a list of demands on the door — including that the department disband the VIPER unit. Just two months later, the department did get rid of VIPER — But they replaced it with something very similar that would prove to be just as controversial.

[Promotional music comes up.... Chief Conrad's voice narrates. 'Overnight while most sleep, LMPD's Ninth Mobile Division is just getting started.']

Narrator: LMPD has eight divisions. Ninth Mobile was an additional violent crime unit that was deployed to different high-crime areas around the city.

MALE VOICE: You could focus on the most violent people and the most violent places.

Narrator: That's former LMPD Deputy Chief Michael Sullivan. He now works for the Baltimore Police Department, but back in 2016, he helped oversee the department's implementation of 21st Century Policing.

Narrator: After all the controversy that the VIPER unit attracted, the only real change was that 9th Mobile officers would wear dark shirts and vests that identified them as police officers. They didn't even change up the roster that much. We found that when Ninth Mobile was created, more than three quarters of officers in the unit had been in VIPER when it disbanded.

Narrator: 9th Mobile was part of LMPD's "People, Places and Narcotics" strategy, targeting repeat offenders, high-crime areas and drug trafficking. Sullivan says with violent crime on the rise, the city had to act.

Michael Sullivan: When the house is on fire, you have to put it out before you start rebuilding it.

Narrator: But — this came at a cost, Sullivan says. 9th Mobile was completely oppositional to the idea of community-oriented policing — it's hard to walk a beat if the whole city is your jurisdiction.

Michael Sullivan: We did see reductions in crime. With that, the next question is, what was the cost of that crime reduction?

Narrator: Kevin Trees witnessed the impact of these strategies first hand. Trees retired in 2019 after 20 years with LMPD, most of it in the West End. He says he had good community relationships, knew the players, knew Bishop Dennis Lyons —

Kevin Trees: Oh, I know Bishop Lyons well. He knows me. He couldn't say Trees. He'd say Tree

BISHOP LYONS: Officer Tree. Officer Tree.

Kevin Trees: Known him since 1999 and his gas station chapel.

Narrator: In 2016, Trees was a sergeant in the 2nd Division, which covers parts of the West End. He says they often didn't even know 9th Mobile had been working in their neighborhood until after they'd left.

Kevin Trees: 9th Mobile would run across one of our regulars, people that we knew, people that we've developed a relationship with. And quite often, after they're done with their, whatever they are stopping that person for, our next interaction with that person was just a little bit more uncooperative, just a little bit more unfriendly, just a little bit less helpful.

Narrator: Trees saw the value in having a specialized unit to deal with violent crime. But he says 9th Mobile's tactics often ended up causing problems for the rest of the department.

Narrator: And over time, these aggressive policing strategies spread far beyond that one small unit. Police Chief Steve Conrad called 9th Mobile "the tip of the spear" of the department's tactics, and Mayor Greg Fischer touted the unprecedented resources he was pouring into fighting violent crime.

Narrator: But — remember — Louisville wasn't just trying to fight crime. They were also trying to build trust and legitimacy, and community relationships. But those efforts didn't seem to get nearly the same resources. Here's Trees again.

Kevin Trees: We simply do not have the manpower to be able to get out on the streets and make the runs and get with the community and just be available, for anything. We just don't have the time anymore.

Narrator: Now, to be fair, LMPD did hire more officers — using a federal grant — to focus on community policing. Here's Mayor Greg Fischer at a 2016 press conference:

Mayor Greg Fischer: We're adding 10 officers to the community policing effort, freeing them from responding to 911 calls so they can better get to know young people and other citizens in all of our neighborhoods and especially those neighborhoods with higher crime rates.

Narrator: We spoke with Laurie Robinson, who co-chaired the task force that created the 21st Century Policing report, and told her about Louisville's community policing unit.

Laurie Robinson: Community policing has to be...the culture of the entire department. It's not setting up one unit that has five people on bicycles riding around.

Narrator: She's speaking generally, but Robinson was so surprised by what we told her about LMPD's community policing unit that she actually paused our interview to read directly from the report.

Laurie Robinson: Community policing 4.2 should be infused throughout the culture and organizational structure of law enforcement agencies. Must be a way of doing business by an entire police force, not just a specialized unit of the force. I haven't read that in a while, but it's certainly, definitely true. Yup. Yeah, that's bad.

Narrator: Kevin Trees thinks so too. He says this community policing unit felt more like PR than meaningful change.

Kevin Trees: If you're gonna try to change the perception of a neighborhood, and in my experience the West End of Louisville, you can't go out on that block on a Thursday afternoon for one hour, walk around, say 'Hey, hey, hey people,' and then go away. And

I'll be back next week for an hour. That's not what it's gonna take. You know, it's going to take a full time effort.

Narrator: LMPD was certainly portraying this as a full-time, full-department effort. Conrad said in July 2016 that they'd documented more than a thousand times that year that officers had gotten out of their cars to talk with community members. That sounds impressive, until you remember there were roughly 1,000 officers at LMPD at that time. That comes to about one interaction per officer.

Narrator: This community policing unit is just one example of a larger phenomenon — Over the last year, I interviewed lots of people who touched Louisville's implementation of 21st Century Policing - council people, community activists, police officers. Many of them, unprompted, used the same phrase:

[Montage of NUMEROUS VOICES]

They checked a bunch of boxes to say that they were 21st Century.

A checkbox.

We talk about checkbox reform.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: I don't know why it became a checked box, but it says walk in the neighborhood. And once a week, the Chief Conrad would come and they'd walk, but then pretty soon it became we walking but as soon as the cameras leave, 'Let's go.'

Narrator: Take that Clergy Police Academy that Bishop Dennis Lyons was so excited about. LMPD noted this initiative in their workbooks as an example of building relationships with the clergy; Lyons says more than 100 pastors attended over the years. With homicides surging, Lyons was hoping the police would call on them to help comfort grieving families, de-escalate possible retaliation and work with the police to build community relationships.

Narrator: But — he says — that's not what happened.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: Never one time called that team together. Now, we're talking about 2015, 16, 17, 18, 19, never did get a chance to ask what was the problem, we have your certificate, we have the willing persons, the willing ministers.

Narrator: In a statement, an LMPD spokesperson said they have called on the clergy to come out to crime scenes in the past, and they are working now to reinvigorate that effort. But Lyons says there was never a widespread effort the way he had hoped. Lyons thought this was the problem with the department's whole approach to reform.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: "The police were always ready for us to attend their seminars. But they were never willing to attend our seminars. So it became one-sided, still became that same mentality of master-slave."

Narrator: LMPD didn't grant us an interview with department leadership. But in a statement, they said that while the department had successfully implemented aspects of 21st Century Policing, they had faced challenges with others. They said the department had undergone significant leadership change since that time, and now, they look forward to developing a strong and proud relationship with the community.

Narrator: But back in 2016 — while touting these reform efforts — the department continued to invest in and invigorate their efforts to fight violent crime — despite the potential cost to public trust.

Narrator: Take the Flex Platoons — each of the eight divisions had a group of detectives who worked in the neighborhood, but could also be called upon to do violent crime or narcotics assignments. Because they were based in the communities that they served, they avoided a lot of the major controversy that the city-wide units attracted — they were even popular with some people.

FEMALE VOICE: I know these guys, my community knows these guys. They trust these guys and women...

Narrator: Metro Councilwoman Cheri Bryant Hamilton spoke about the Flex Platoons at a hearing in 2016. Bryant Hamilton represented parts of the West End at that time.

Cheri Bryant Hamilton: They're my eyes and ears, they're your eyes and ears...my constituents eyes and ears on the ground...My constituents have their phone numbers, know how to reach them.

Narrator: This hearing was called by a Metro Council committee because in 2016, Conrad announced that LMPD was disbanding the Flex Platoons. They were going to take those detectives out of the divisions, out of the neighborhoods they worked in, and assign them to high priority, citywide teams: a SWAT unit and Narcotics.

Cheri Bryant Hamilton: If you take all of this resources to a central narcotics division, what are we going to be left with?

Narrator: The outcry was swift, from all sides. Flex officers attended this hearing, as did community members speaking out in support of the units. At the hearing, Councilmember David James, a former LMPD narcotics detective, asked Conrad about how this reorganization aligned with the department's stated policing philosophy —

David James: And I have one last question...are any of the changes related to the 21st Century Policing study that you all are implementing, I guess is the best way to say that?

Narrator: Chief Conrad said... no. But he took the opportunity to talk about how great 21st Century Policing was and how important it was to his department.

Chief Conrad: The 21st Century Policing plan is something that we've embraced, we've been invited to the White House a number of times to talk about what we're doing here, we're being held up as a model for what a community can do...<<fade under>>

Narrator: More than a minute later, he got back to the point.

Chief Conrad: And we're proud to be a part of that process. But a long answer to your simple question. These changes are not related to the 21st Century Policing plan. They may compliment it but they were not related or because of it.

Narrator: None of this was a compliment to 21st Century Policing. It was taking officers from the communities where they were based — and putting them on city-wide violent crime units. Over the next few years, these city-wide units led the rest of the department in a policing strategy that targeted the West End with aggressive traffic stops and maximum enforcement.

Narrator: Which brings us back to the intersection of Dixie and Algonquin, and Tae-Ahn Lea's bright orange Dodge Charger on the side of the road.

[ambient street noise]

Narrator: The detectives who got Tae-Ahn Lea on the sidewalk, set a dog on his car, hand-cuffed him, patted him down — they were with the 9th Mobile Division. That's why they were sitting in unmarked cars at the gas station. Lea later said that was why he was so confused —

Tae-Ahn Lea: They was in unmarked cars. They didn't have on, you know, the normal police uniform. Typically, I assumed that officers like them were looking for drugs or guns.

Narrator: Detectives Hellard and Crawford didn't respond to requests for comment; Crawford later said in a deposition that he believed Lea was involved in criminal activity because he was slow to pull over and he didn't tell the officers there was a baseball bat in the car. Body camera footage shows Lea putting on his blinker to pull over immediately after the sirens start. Hellard told LMPD investigators that Lea was, quote, verbally aggressive. He said when Lea answered the phone call from his mother, he created a safety issue for the officers.

Narrator: Detective McCauley said he wasn't allowed to comment, citing pending litigation.

Narrator: Lea has filed a federal lawsuit against the officers who stopped him. He declined our interview request through his lawyer. But he and his mother, Tija (TIE-uh) Jackson, spoke to the Metro Council in 2019 about this experience.

Tija Jackson: The last thing I heard was 'Mama, they taking me out of the vehicle.' So I probably broke every traffic infraction there was at that time. So when I pulled up, my son

was at that time being turned around and handcuffed and... the dog was going through my car.

Narrator: Jackson was terrified. Her son was around the same age as Michael Brown was when he was killed by Ferguson Police, and Laquan McDonald, when he was killed by Chicago police. Jackson had ingrained in her son — keep your hands on the wheel, don't reach for your license, don't reach for your insurance...don't give them a reason.

[BEEP BEEP of police radio. Detective: Got family showing up wanting to cause a ruckus]

Narrator: Jackson tries to get to her son — and Detective Kevin Crawford stops her. They exchange words.

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: “He didn't give you permission to search his car.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: Ok, we don't need his permission.

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: Yes you do.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: we had a positive indication by the canine.

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: [skeptically] Oh, my gosh.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: So ma'am, you guys are more than welcome to watch, video tape, whatever, just do me a favor, give us some room and stay over here, please. Ma'am, please stay over here, you're trespassing on private property right now, ma'am stay over there, please. If you approach my traffic stop -

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: That's my son.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: I will take you to jail -

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: That's my car.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: I don't care.

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: I don't care *either*.

BODY CAMERA/CRAWFORD: You know what? Okay, great.

Narrator: Crawford stalks off. Eventually, once they realize they're not going to find drugs in Lea's car, Detective Jeffrey McCauley goes over to talk with Jackson.

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: If it's a wrong turn, give him a ticket.

BODY CAMERA/MCCAULEY: That's not what we're out here for, OK?

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: What are you out here for?

...

BODY CAMERA/MCCAULEY: We're a violent crimes unit...Okay, We don't pick and choose where we work. We are told by our commanders, by the chief's office, and all of that is based off of criminal violence statistics.

Narrator: Detective McCauley said he wasn't allowed to comment for this story, citing pending litigation.

Narrator: LMPD claimed to be targeting the most dangerous parts of the city to apprehend the most dangerous people — the murderers, the gun runners, the drug kingpins. But these detectives have spent almost half an hour detaining Tae-Ahn Lea.

Narrator: At one point, they say the dog seems fixated on his wallet, and ask him if maybe someone who had used drugs... later touched his wallet. A kingpin, Tae-Ahn Lea is not.

Narrator: That's what Tija Jackson is trying to explain to the officers —

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: I appreciate y'all being out here for violent crime. if you run his name he's never been in JCYC, nothing, he got a job.

BODY CAMERA DETECTIVE: No one said he was a [mimics her delivery] violent crime — no one said he was.

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: Then there's no reason for him to be out of the car, handcuffed, for a traffic ticket.

BODY CAMERA DETECTIVE: Can you tell me how to pick out violent crime? Can you tell me how?

BODY CAMERA/JACKSON: I don't need to tell you how, because they can run across the street too fast and you'll say it's violent.

Narrator: Jackson and Detective McCauley argue a bit more until she walks off. Later, he talks with one of the other officers.

BODY CAMERA/MCCAULEY: Making up stuff, it's a disease. She'll spill that over the internet and it'll have a 1,000 likes before you know it, and none of it's true.

Narrator: Just watching the video, you can feel the contempt between the officers and Jackson. You can almost see the gulf between the police and the community... widening... the longer this stop goes on.

Narrator: Eventually, with nothing left to hold him on, the detectives uncuff Lea, return his ID and his keys, and let him go — with a traffic citation.

Narrator: Tae-Ahn Lea was exactly the kind of person LMPD should have been trying to build a relationship with — a young Black man who says before this, he didn't have much of an issue with the police. He could have become a David McAtee, a Bishop Lyons, an ally in the department's effort to bridge the divide between police and the West End.

Narrator: But that's not what happened.

Tae-Ahn Lea to council: This experience has definitely changed my view. By the saying, you know, if you ain't do nothing wrong, then you aint got nothing to worry about, but that's obviously not true in this situation. Coming out of high school, you know, to the real world, only a couple of months graduated, and then, you know, this is my view of the police due to the car that I drive and the color of my skin. It's not a good way to, you know, view the police.

Narrator: Detective McCauley was right about one thing. — Tija Jackson uploaded the body camera footage from this stop and it exploded. On one YouTube channel, the video got more than a million views.

Narrator: But it's not just this one stop. Take Kevin Crawford, the officer who pulled Tae-Ahn Lea over.

DIFFERENT BODY CAMERA AUDIO: So there's no guns in the car? Any knives?

Narrator: At least three of his traffic stops, initiated in just one six week period, have generated lawsuits over allegations of racially biased policing and internal investigations by LMPD.

Narrator: A lot of officers with the 9th Mobile unit have generated complaints. Newsy's data reporter analyzed the department's disciplinary database and — even by her conservative calculations — officers with 9th Mobile were nearly three times as likely to be investigated as the rest of the force.

Narrator: And 9th Mobile's tactics have faced scrutiny at the highest levels. We found at least four criminal cases where the judge threw out evidence after they determined that the unit's search was unconstitutional.

Narrator: LMPD knew that 9th Mobile had the potential to burn trust, to weaken the department's legitimacy, to get in the way of their efforts to build a better, safer, more equitable police department. In Louisville, crime fighting and community policing became a tug of war — and they let crime fighting win. Every time.

Narrator: Homicides did recede in Louisville after that record-setting 2016. Chief Conrad told the Metro Council that this was proof that this traffic stop tactic was working -

Chief Conrad: Looking at some statistics from last year, one in 10 cars that we stopped in the second police division led to the discovery of guns, drugs or both. So it's not like where we're out stopping this and not getting anything from it.

Narrator: But that means *nine* out of every ten traffic stops were people like Tae-Ahn Lea — no guns, no drugs, but still getting stopped, hassled, inconvenienced, or maybe even handcuffed, standing on the side of the road while the police set a dog on their car.

Narrator: Nearly a year after Tae-Ahn Lea was stopped, Chief Conrad did modify the department's traffic stop policy, specifying that merely being nervous or in a high-crime area did not justify getting drivers out of their car or handcuffing them.

Narrator: Tija Jackson told the Courier Journal that she was happy Conrad was trying to, quote, "bridge the gap between the community and the police." This was in May 2019, a full three years after LMPD had been invited to the White House for its policing reform efforts.

[Dig theme music comes up]

Narrator: The traffic citation against Tae-Ahn Lea was dismissed in court. He has a federal civil rights lawsuit pending against Crawford, LMPD leadership, and the other officers who pulled him over.

Narrator: Two years later, the department finally closed its internal investigation, saying they would have concluded that Crawford had done nothing wrong in the Lea stop — without even interviewing him. But by that time, Crawford had resigned from LMPD — and immediately joined the Jeffersonville Police Department across the river in Indiana.

Narrator: All three cases against Crawford were closed by exception without discipline after he left the department.

Narrator: This wasn't an oversight, or a crack in the system. It was LMPD's disciplinary system working exactly the way it was designed. And that's what we have to talk about next. Because you can't fully understand what was happening out on the streets until you understand what was going on inside the department.

VOICES: "This Officer is still out, doing whatever he — *shooting people* — shooting people."

"Discipline was almost consistently always appealed."

Narrator: NEXT TIME, ON DIG.

Female voice: This season of Dig was reported by Eleanor Klibanoff with the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Carrie Cochran, Karen Rodriguez, Maia Rosenfeld and Maren Machles (MAIR-en MACK-less) with Newsy. It was produced by Eleanor Klibanoff. Edited by Kate Howard, Laura Ellis and Ellen Weiss. Data reporting by Rosie Cima (Chee-mah) and Mark Fahey (FAY-hee). Production assistance by Rip Rinehart and Chris Julin (JOO-lin). Field producing by Zach Cusson (KOO-sahn), Mai Nolasco-Carranza (MY No-LASS-koe Cah-RAHN-zah), Tyler Franklin and Chelsae Ketchum (CHEL-see KETCH-um). Kojin Tashiro created our theme music, with Ryan Marsh. Fact checking by Kelvin Bias. Alex Cooper is our intern. We received support for this project from The Fund for Investigative Journalism.