Justice Dept. mandates 'implicit bias' training for agents, lawyers

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents go door to door to interview residents of the neighborhood where teenager Michael Brown was shot, in Ferguson, Missouri, August 16, 2014.
REUTERS/LUCAS JACKSON

Justice Dept. mandates 'implicit bias' training...X

By Julia Edwards | WASHINGTON

The U.S. Justice Department announced on Monday that more than 33,000 federal agents and prosecutors will receive training aimed at preventing unconscious bias from influencing their law enforcement decisions.

The training will bring Justice Department employees in line with many local police departments across the country that have implemented bias prevention plans following a spate of shootings of unarmed black men by white police officers.

Nationwide protests following those shootings blamed police bias for unnecessary use of force against minorities.

The department had been criticized for not developing its own policies to combat bias after recommending local police do so at the direction of a task force created by President Barack Obama after riots in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri.

In a memo to Justice Department employees, Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates said the program targets "implicit biases" - subtle, unconscious stereotypes or characterizations nearly everyone makes about certain groups of people.

"But implicit bias also presents unique challenges to effective law enforcement, because it can alter where investigators and prosecutors look for evidence and how they analyze it without their awareness or ability to compensate," Yates said in the memo.

The training will be mandatory for all Justice Department agents and prosecutors and will be rolled out over the next year, Yates said.

Arrest data compiled by some police departments have shown that black and Hispanic men are more likely to be stopped by police than others, suggesting officers may be exerting implicit bias in deciding whom to question or apprehend.

The Justice Department will use a model developed by the former director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a nonprofit organization that provides expertise on policing issues. It is designed to make people aware of attitudes they may hold about certain races, genders, nationalities and other characteristics.

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, said the training is an "imperative step forward" but "training alone will not eradicate discrimination in prosecutions and policing."

The Justice Department employs more than 5,800 attorneys and 28,000 law enforcement agents across four agencies: The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the U.S. Marshals Service.

Police departments such as those in Baltimore, New York City, Seattle, New Orleans and Los Angeles have training programs in place that help officers recognize biases they may have but not be aware of following a national outcry against police bias in minority communities.

Asked why the Justice Department only now has begun such training for its employees, Yates said success in local jurisdictions caused the federal government to consider it as well.

"This program has been so well-received by our state and local counterparts, we thought it was something we should be offering to our federal agents, frankly, to get our own house in order," Yates said in an interview with Reuters.

Yates and the heads of other Justice Department components will begin their own implicit bias training course on Tuesday. Attorney General Loretta Lynch will promote the initiative in Phoenix on Tuesday when she travels there as part of her community policing tour, said a Justice Department official.

Department of Homeland Security employees, which include 60,000 border patrol officers and agents, will not be subject to the training.

Yates said the Justice Department hopes to serve as a model for other federal agencies that have not yet addressed implicit bias.

(Reporting by Julia Edwards; Editing by Dan Grebler)

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