

New Footage Emerges of Police Pepper-Spraying of Distraught 9-Year-Old

“Please don’t do this to me,” the child said to an officer in Rochester, N.Y. “You did it to yourself, hon,” the officer replied.

By Ed Shanahan

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A 9-year-old girl is in the back of a police car, handcuffed and crying after being pepper-sprayed amid a struggle with several officers who had been trying to detain her.

“Officer,” she says between sobs to a female officer in the front of the car, “please don’t do this to me.”

The officer’s matter-of-fact reply shows no sign of empathy.

“You did it to yourself, hon,” she says.

The exchange was included in extended police body-camera video of the Jan. 29 incident that Rochester, N.Y., officials released on Thursday, offering a fuller look at the troubling episode and touching off a fresh burst of fury over the officers’ treatment of a child in distress.

At an hour and a half, the footage was much longer than the 16 minutes of video made public shortly after the encounter, which has attracted international attention, widespread condemnation and growing calls for overhauling a police force that was already under scrutiny over the suffocation death of a Black man whose head officers had put in a hood.

In releasing the footage, Mayor Lovely Warren said city officials were “committed to being transparent and sharing all of the information and video regarding this incident.” The death in police custody of the man who suffocated, Daniel Prude, was not divulged for more than five months.

“I continue to share our community’s outrage for the treatment of this child,” Ms. Warren said.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo described the footage released on Thursday as “even more shocking and disturbing” than the earlier version. The incident, Mr. Cuomo said, was “symptomatic of a broader problem — the relationship between police and communities is damaged and needs to be fixed.”

The newly released footage shows several of the nine officers who ultimately responded to the scene repeatedly threatening the girl as they struggle to get her completely into the back of a police car. She is clearly in distress and yelling that she wants her father.

“Listen to me — you’re going to get sprayed if you don’t get in,” one officer says.

“Get in the car,” comes another command. “I’m done telling you.”

“I’m going to pepper-spray you, and I don’t want to,” one officer says. “So sit back.”

“Please don’t,” the girl says.

“This is your last chance, or pepper spray is going into your eyeballs,” an officer says.

A female officer tries to persuade the girl to get all the way into the car.

Soon, one officer, and then a second, can be heard saying, “Just spray her.” Seconds later, one of them does and then shuts the door as the girl screams, “My eye is bleeding.”

In the aftermath, the female officer sits in the front of the car and tells the girl, “You did it to yourself.”

“It’s burning my eyes,” the girl says.

“That’s the point of pepper spray,” the officer says.

Donald Thompson, a lawyer for the girl’s family, said the new video was “far more disturbing” than the earlier footage.

“The lack of humanity is amazing,” he said.

The Democrat and Chronicle, a Rochester newspaper, estimated that it had taken an ambulance about 15 minutes to arrive after the girl was pepper-sprayed and that it was 23 minutes before one of the handcuffs she had been placed in was removed.

In the footage, after the ambulance arrives, one officer tries to comfort the girl.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but you’re not in trouble right now,” he says.

The newly released video, which is drawn from the body-worn cameras of several officers and which blurs out the face of the girl and omits any commentary that would identify her or her family, captures much more of the events before and after the pepper-spraying.

The episode began with officers answering a call for “family trouble,” officials said. The new video starts with one officer taking a complaint from a woman about her boyfriend’s having driven off in her truck. The woman says that the man is abusive and that she is pregnant. At some point, she also says her daughter is suicidal and has threatened to harm her.

The officer’s attention turns to the girl, who has run off down a snow-covered street. She appears to be in distress, and he initially tries a gentle approach. He calls her “dear,” asks why she is upset and urges her to get out of the freezing cold.

Then, as the earlier video showed, the mother appears and chaos erupts, as she yells and moves to strike her daughter. The girl is crying and screaming.

As the altercation escalates, the officer seems taken aback. The tension mounts when the girl’s mother begins to yell at the driver of a passing vehicle, challenging the person to a fight.

By this point, the officer is struggling to get the girl into handcuffs.

“Wait, can you please go help my mom?” she yells. “She’s pregnant.”

The struggle that led to the pepper-spraying starts in earnest after that.

When the initial body-camera footage was released, Michael Mazzeo, the president of the union that represents Rochester’s police officers, defended the officers’ actions and said they had been confronted with a difficult situation. He did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Thursday.

Willie Lightfoot, the vice president of the Rochester City Council, said that he had been “angered” by what the footage showed and that the officers involved in the incident should not be policing the city’s streets. One has been suspended, and two have been placed on leave.

“Those who act the way we see in that video should not be allowed to get a paycheck from these citizens,” Mr. Lightfoot said.

He also said he was troubled by something else the video shows: the officer who initially responded to the scene returning to the mother’s house and loudly confronting her over her confrontation with the passing vehicle. He dismisses her attempt at an apology.

“Now, I’ve got to do paperwork why I put down a 9-year-old girl on the ground,” he says, “and you’re fighting with someone in a van driving down the street.”

Mr. Lightfoot said that such an attitude showed a “disregard for humanity and dignity and respect.”

He noted that Rochester had taken steps in recent years to address problems with the Police Department, including the creation of an independent Police Accountability Board, and that more were in the works. Still, he sounded somewhat discouraged.

“Every time it seems like we are taking a step forward,” he said, “something else happens.”

Ed Shanahan is a rewrite reporter and editor covering breaking news and general assignments on the Metro desk. @edkshanahan

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