

# Race, Equity, and Policing in Spartanburg: A conversation with Police Chief Alonzo Thompson (Part 2)

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## Chief Thompson shares thoughts on policing in aftermath of George Floyd killing



In the second part of an in-depth discussion, Spartanburg Police Chief Alonzo Thompson shares more of his thinking about policing and race. He also provides his perspective about the changing nature of the job in Spartanburg as the city continues to grow. If you missed Part I, [you can read it here](#).

**Q:** Let's talk about the concept of unconscious bias, and specifically unconscious bias in policing. Do you think it's a problem and if so how do you, as a police chief, attempt to address it with your officers?

**Chief Thompson:** It is a problem in our society in general. Put it this way — I can get out and walk from my downtown condo in my uniform and I'm approached or responded in one way. I get "Hi, Officer" or "How ya' doing, Chief?" But when I'm in my Under Armour or looking a little more grungy, they might slide over a little bit, look straight ahead, don't make eye contact, don't speak. Black men have been made the boogey men. We were 3/5 human. Think about that: we were not considered a full human. We were made out to be animalistic. So this is baked into the American psyche.

I was on my way driving up to Michigan and I was stopped. I thought the poor young trooper was going to shake the damn bullets out of his gun. You know, I'm 200-plus pounds black man. I told him "It's all good, man." You know, today is not the day I want to die. Now because I had my sidearm I revealed to him I was an officer. I said nothing out of line, I did everything he told me, but I could tell he was scared because I'm a black man.

**Q:** That interaction in and of itself doesn't mean that young trooper is an overt racist or believes in white supremacy or anything like that. But he was obviously scared of you.

**Chief Thompson:** No, none of that. But there is a fear of "the other." Another example is the Philando Castile incident in Minnesota. He was the passenger in the car, his girlfriend is driving and the baby is in the back. I'm watching the video of that and I could tell by the officer's voice he's scared. I'm looking at that and I'm thinking "Why is he so afraid? The man is doing everything the officer is telling him." You could tell in the tenor of his voice that he was afraid. And he was afraid for no other reason, in my opinion, of Mr. Castile.

That type of fear based on race is taught.

**Q:** This sounds like you are describing systemic racism. Some people will hear that and disagree pretty strongly with that idea.

**Chief Thompson:** I understand that. I tell people all the time that my role of Chief goes beyond just the enforcement of laws, but it includes bringing a perspective to the table as another human being and another resident of the City. This isn't a police issue only. Criminal justice is one piece, but it impacts housing, it impacts education, it impacts health and wellness. It is an across-the-board, systemic issue. All the brownfields are in minority communities. Why is that? And what is the impact of that?

And then there have been a lot of well-intentioned policies that have unintended consequences. Here locally, Urban Renewal was an example of that. Some of that was well-intentioned, but it had the effect of destroying black businesses and entire black neighborhoods. It destroyed what little bit of wealth and opportunity many people had. It set people back and changed the city in dramatic ways for generations.

**Q:** So bringing this back to policing, how do you make a difference with our own police department? For example, how do you ensure that a person leaving a party or an event in a predominantly Black neighborhood who may have had too much to drink or where there was suspected drug use is treated the same way a person leaving the same type of party or event in a white neighborhood is treated? How do you teach an officer that you don't need to be any more scared, suspicious, etc?

**Chief Thompson:** To me, how you address that to extent we humanly can despite all the stuff that has been put in our heads: If you go into that situation, you are only addressing the behavior. This person has left a party, regardless of where it was, and is crossing the center line, bobbing and weaving. OK, this person may be drunk, I'm going to pull them over. There is a process. I'm going to go up to their car, I'm going to treat them with respect, regardless. But I'm addressing their behavior, their conduct. My actions will be based on what they do. Again, I'm going to treat this person like my mom, my dad, my most beloved who may have made a bad decision.

This person may yell and cuss, but as long as they are complying, there is no need to escalate — now, there may come a time when they cross the line and we may have to do something different. The rule I apply, I don't care if I'm dealing with a corporate leader or a homeless person, I'm going to treat them both with respect.

**Q:** Let's end on a hopeful, positive note. In terms of the Spartanburg police department and city government and the community in general, what are we doing well? What have we gotten right?

**Chief Thompson:** Spartanburg has done a lot of things right. We're not a perfect city, but I think there are a lot of people here willing to listen and work together. One of the first places I was invited to speak when I got here was the country club. Not too long ago, I would not have been in this position, I would not have been invited to speak to that group in that place. I think there has been some tremendous leadership here that has made this community as diverse as it is, especially in city government where we have a tremendous representation of Black people and women in leadership.

That doesn't solve everything, but it does play an important role in allowing us to see, for example, protestors as people who have a constitutional right to do what they're doing rather than potentially seeing them immediately as threats, as "the other" or as enemy combatants. They're not. Now there may come a time when we have to change tactics in order to protect property and public safety. But our mentality of policing in partnership and reflecting the community we serve, and being consistent with that approach, is very important.

When people see the police chief, the assistant police chief, the assistant city manager, the neighborhood services director, the parks and recreation director are Black — that is so impactful and important for Black children to be able to look at the city and see people who look like them and internalize that they have opportunity here. When I was growing up, that wasn't the case in my hometown or in a lot of places.

Sometime in the past, people in Spartanburg decided to make diversity and inclusion in leadership here at the City more than just a goal or words. They gave people opportunities. There is still work to do. There is still progress to make. But we also shouldn't lose sight of the progress that we have made here as we continue to push for more equality and justice for everyone.