

POLICY MEMO  
Spokane Police Department Participation in  
“Reality-Based” Police Shows  
August 3, 2017

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TO: Ben Stuckart, President – Spokane City Council  
Lori Kinnear – Chair, Spokane City Council Public Safety Committee  
Breean Beggs – Member, Spokane Regional Law & Justice Council  
Brian McClatchey – Spokane City Council Policy Adviser

FR: Adam McDaniel, Senior Executive Assistant to the Council President

Subject: Spokane Police Department Participation in “Reality-Based” Police Television Programs

**City of Spokane Agreement Background**

The Spokane Police Department entered into an open-ended agreement on December 14, 2016, with Langley Productions (LP) to produce Spokane-based episodes of the reality-based police television program COPS<sup>1</sup>. COPS is a reality-based television program that embeds camera crews with police units during patrols and other police activities (COPS, n.d.). The Spokane City Council did not approve this agreement, nor has policy regarding the City of Spokane’s participation in reality-based police television programs ever been developed. Although Langley Productions is doing business in the City of Spokane, they do not have a business license.

The Spokane Police Department has final determination in what footage is provided to Langley Productions (LP) and, thus, the ability to remove or revise portions of the segment (Letter of Understanding between Langley Productions and Spokane Police Department, 2016). Citizens have a right to not be filmed. Section 4 of the Spokane Police Department’s Letter of Understanding with Langley Productions (LP) reads: “LP recognizes that some officers and citizens may refuse to be filmed and that the Department has no obligation to compel to do so. LP agrees that all filming of Department personnel will be undertaken with the employees’ consent and that no employee will be compensated by LP for any time, effort or cooperation expended on the program” (Letter of Understanding between Langley Productions and Spokane Police Department, 2016). Citizens must provide consent via release forms to have their faces shown on the program. However, a teenage suspect accused program producers of coercing him to sign the release forms (Vlahos, 2013). Importantly, there are no enumerated protections or guidelines in the letter of understanding for citizens suffering from diagnosed mental illness, victims of domestic violence, or minors.

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<sup>1</sup> Attachment 2

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**Review of the Literature**

Sociologists and criminal justice experts find empirical evidence that reality-based police television programs, such as COPS and Live PD<sup>2</sup>, misrepresent law enforcement and crime by:

- Over-representing violent crime
- Over-representing minorities as the perpetrators of crimes
- Over-representing the number of crimes that reach resolution

Reality-based police television programs also misrepresent people suffering from mental illness, stigmatize drug abuse and alcoholism, and serve as a negative and damaging national advertisement of our city and region<sup>3</sup> (Ho Shon & Arrigo, 2007, pp. 75-76).

Multiple academic studies find that reality-based police television programs over-represent violent crime. A 1991 study by Dr. Mary Beth Oliver from the University of Wisconsin found that violent crimes represented 87% of the crime portrayed on reality-based police shows; although FBI statistics classified only 13% of all crimes as violent (Oliver, 1991). This over-representation of violent crime is significant. A study on television violence by Gerbner and Gross explained how television violence can impact society’s view of authority, law enforcement, and use of force: “Ritualized displays of violence (such as in crime and disaster news, as well as in mass-produced drama) may cultivate exaggerated assumptions about the extent of threat and danger in the world and lead to demands for protection. What is the net result? A heightened sense of risk and insecurity (different for groups of varying power) is more likely to increase acquiescence to and dependence upon established authority, and to legitimize its use of force” (Gerbner & Gross, 1979). As Gerbner and Gross point out, the portrayal of violence leads society to exaggerate general risk of violence. This, combined with the over-representation of minorities as perpetrators in reality-based police television programs, portrays a warped view of crime, and a local police jurisdiction complicit in that warped view.

The same Oliver study found that “white characters on ‘reality-based’ police shows were more likely to be portrayed as police officers than perpetrators of crimes; whereas, black

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<sup>2</sup> LivePD provides “live access inside a variety of the country’s busiest police forces, both urban and rural, and the communities they patrol on a typical night. Viewers are encouraged to post their comments about what they witness throughout the night on Facebook and Twitter” (A&E, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> See Twitter national Twitter reaction to a Spokane County Live PD episode as attachment 1.

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and Hispanic characters were more likely to be shown as criminals than police officers” (Oliver, 1991). A 2007 analysis of the television show COPS by Elizabeth Monk-Turner, published in the *Internet Journal of Criminology*, found similar results (Monk-Turner, 2007). Academics like Oliver and Monk-Turner have argued that reality-based police shows perpetuate the myth that African-American men commit more crimes than others (Monk-Turner, 2007). As the Monk-Turner study points out, “If one based their understanding of crime, law and law enforcement on ‘reality’ television, one would believe that virtually all police officers are white men. They would also believe that black men committed most crimes as well as the most serious ones” (Monk-Turner, 2007, p. 11). This warped depiction of crime in American society furthers explicit and implicit bias.

The disproportionate representation of African-Americans in reality-based police television programs is also shown to reinforce negative stereotypes. A 2002 study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* found that “for White male viewers, the predominance of White male officers on ‘reality’ police programs might create an ‘affinity’ with images of law enforcement and the law-and-order perspective advocated on ‘reality’ police programming. In contrast, African Americans on ‘reality’ police programs were disproportionately depicted as criminals in comparison to law enforcement officials, and women were almost completely absent from these programs, except as an occasional victim. As ‘affinity’ with law enforcement officials thus was less likely for these groups, and it was not surprising that watching ‘reality’ police programs was unrelated to confidence in the police among African American respondents” (Britton, Gertz, Blackwell, & Chiricos, 2002, p. 337).

The City of Spokane is actively trying to address its own disproportionate police contacts with minorities (Byrnes & Arleth, 2017). We must reflect on the City’s participation in “reality-based” police television programs that over-represent people of color as perpetrators of crime. Do programs such as these help the City of Spokane address this existing issue?

Studies also show a law enforcement clearance rate (number of crimes solved or charges laid) that is unrealistic (Oliver, 1991). Prosise and Johnson write in *Law Enforcement and Crime on Cops and World’s Wildest Police Videos: Anecdotal Form and the Justification of Racial Profiling* that, “Because these reality TV programs all but eliminate examples of police-suspect interactions that do not result in arrest or evidence of a more serious crime, the anecdotal form implies that police suspicions are always correct and thus the [pretextual] stops are invariably legitimate, simply products of good police work that makes society safer” (Prosise & Johnson, 2004, p. 85). They continue that, “because the programs under [their] study here show only successful stops, searches, seizures, and arrests, and many of these suspects are minority males, the programming sends a clear but disturbing message: stopping minority drivers or pedestrians when police notice minor traffic infractions or anomalies in behavior, such

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as possessing out of state plates, or because they are ‘acting squirrely,’ or because they are ‘acting suspicious or something,’ is appropriate because it invariably leads to incarceration of serious criminals” (Prosise & Johnson, 2004, p. 86).

This skewed depiction of law enforcement has many civil liberty leaders, including Tim Lynch, the former Director of the Cato Institute’s Project on Criminal Justice, sounding the alarm. Tim Lynch explained, “the audience is led to believe that they’re getting a fair peek at ‘real policing,’ but they don’t realize they’re seeing a distorted picture” (Vlahos, 2013). Even John Langley, creator of COPS, alluded to this distorted picture in an interview with the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*: “We look for the most proactive cops. If a guy is chasing down crime, that’s where we are going to get the best shows. If a guy spends his time in doughnut shop, all you’re going to see is a lot of doughnuts” (Smith, 1993). More frighteningly, some law enforcement professionals believe that “reality-based” police shows like COPS portray officers “routinely violating the Fourth Amendment” (Vlahos, 2013).

### **The Argument Against Spokane Participation**

“Reality-based” police programs are designed to entertain (often comically) and thrill viewers by exposing and exploiting criminal suspects in their worst moments without the ability to see the involvement of further jurisprudence. “Reality-based” police programs are not created to educate the public on Spokane Police Department policies and procedures, nor do they enlighten the viewer about the complicated and systemic causes of crimes such as social, health, environmental, and economic conditions. Prosise and Johnson explain eloquently and simply the minimization of the citizen’s point of view in “reality-based” police programs: “Whereas police are humanized through the use of actual names and portrayed as courageous defenders against the hordes of the criminally insane, the voice of the citizen-suspects is given little credibility” (Prosise & Johnson, 2004).

### **Recommendations for Consideration**

There is overwhelming empirical and anecdotal evidence that participation in “reality-based” police shows has a negative effect. The Spokane City Council should consider the following:

- Should an ordinance be adopted to prevent City of Spokane participation in “reality-based” police shows such as COPS and Live PD? If so, are there legal ramifications involving our current open-ended agreement with Langley Productions (COPS)? Are there any other agreements with “reality-based” police shows of which the Spokane City Council is unaware?

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- If a blanket prohibition on “reality-based” police show participation is unattainable, should an ordinance be adopted to require Spokane City Council approval for participation in any “reality-based” police series?
- Any legislation developed for “reality-based” police shows should consider (and minimize) impacts on Spokane Police Department Policy 319 *Citizen Observation of Officer Activities* (Spokane Police Department, 2017, pp. 109-110) Policy 346 *News Media Relations* (Spokane Police Department, 2017, pp. 191-193), Policy 410 *Ride-Along Policy* (Spokane Police Department, 2017, pp. 272-275), Policy 463 *Public Recording of Law Enforcement* (Spokane Police Department, 2017, pp. 340-341)

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Tweets about a recent LivePD filming in Spokane County with the Spokane County Sheriff's Department – ATTACHMENT 1

DEPLORABLE Amy  
@staggs1969

Look guys, finally Spokane has something besides apartments....  
[#LivePD](#)  
7/29/17, 6:17 PM

Reply

Retweet

Like

Share

Chad Phillips  
@theCRP512

So according to [#LivePD](#) , Spokane County Washington, is preeeeetty ratchet.  
7/29/17, 3:50 PM

Reply

Retweet

Like

Share

Kayla Ferrell  
@kaylamferrell

[#livepd](#) i feel like all the weird ppl are in spokane county.....  
7/29/17, 6:28 PM  
4 Likes

Reply

Retweet

Like

Share

Melissa @BtfulGreenIs · 13h  
Replying to @kaylamferrell  
Yes! I was saying that last night! They're all crazy over there! 😂  
1 Retweet 1 Like

Kayla Ferrell @kaylamferrell · 13h  
I kinda wanna go there just to see all this crazy shit happen 😂

Judith WV  
@1989Wildcat

[#LivePD](#) Spokane and domestic???  
Nothing new.  
7/29/17, 6:29 PM  
1 Retweet 4 Likes

Reply

Retweet

Like

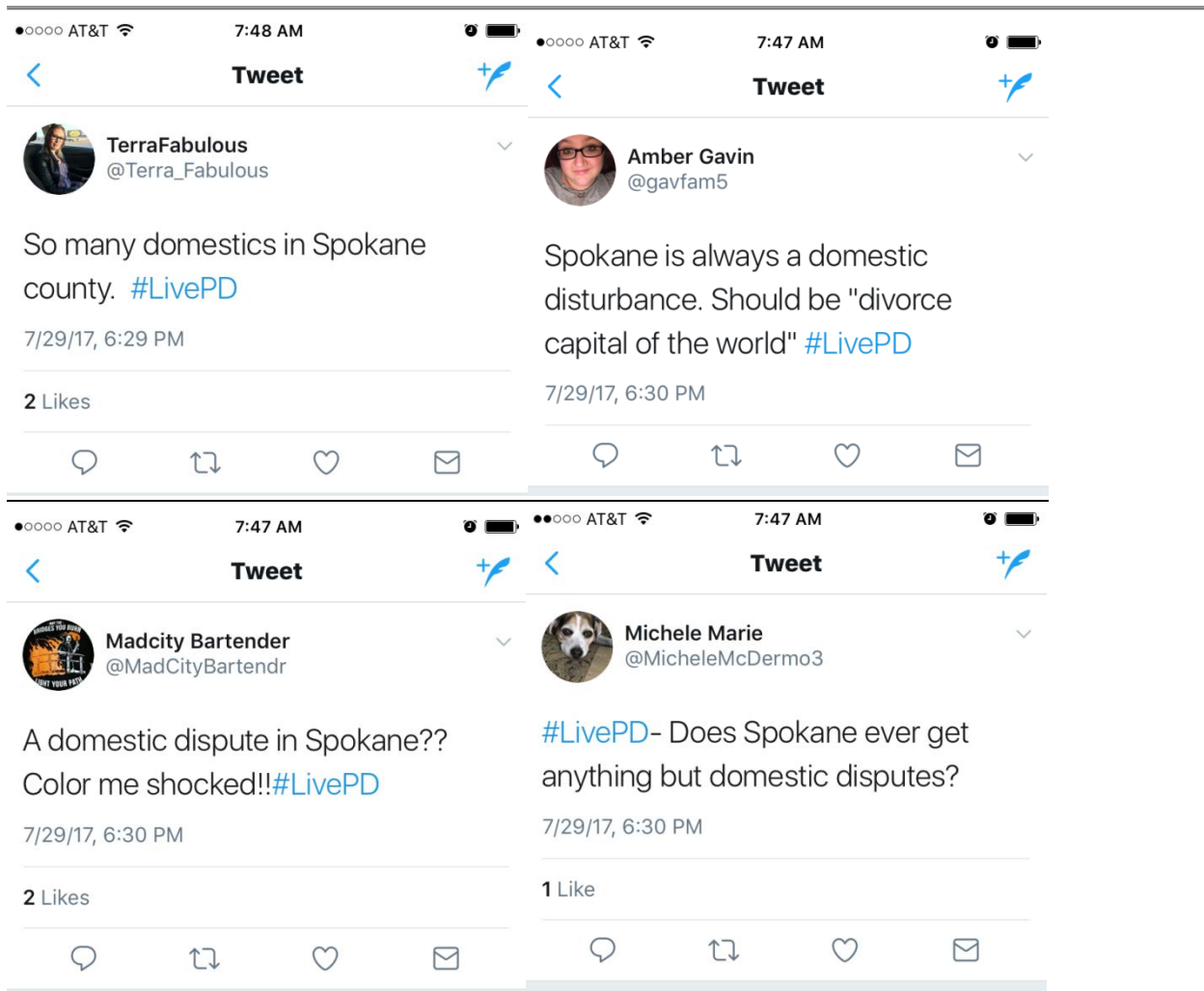
Share

Kellie @KellBellz1105 · 13h  
Replying to @1989Wildcat  
I feel like all we see is Spokane is domestics 😂 I love it 😂

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••••• AT&T 7:46 AM


< Tweet +

 Mike  
@hittheroadmikey

These classy people of Spokane at its finest [#LivePD](#)

••••• AT&T 7:46 AM





< Tweet +


 Hannah Leckey  
@Havnhan24

Spokane County seems to have the most domestic disputes. [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 6:31 PM

1 Like




7/29/17, 6:32 PM

7 Likes

••••• AT&T 7:43 AM





< Tweet +

 Doug Staton  
@skip\_doug

[#LivePD](#) Spokane...home of Drugs and Domestics.


7/29/17, 7:08 PM

2 Likes

••••• AT&T 7:43 AM

< Tweet +

 Mike Hunt  
@Rustycagenail

Spokane is the white trash capital of the northwest [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 7:08 PM

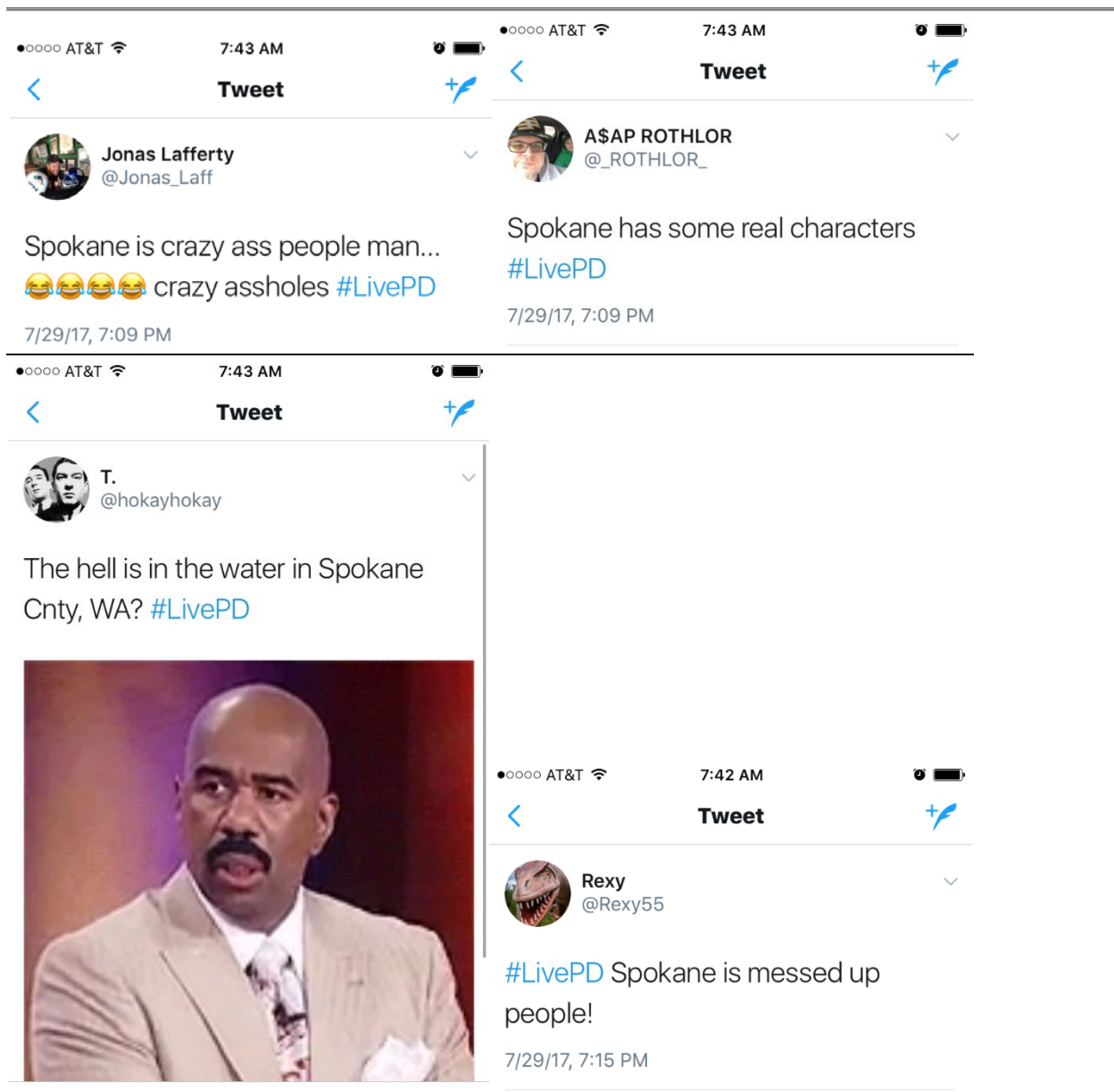
2 Likes

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●●○○○ AT&T 7:42 AM

< Tweet +

 **Erin Lukas**  
@mserin0114


Spokane must have a bad drug problem [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 7:15 PM

1 Like

●●○○○ AT&T 7:41 AM

< Tweet +

 **Shawn**  
@Copyright\_1984


[#livepd](#) Spokane have hella issues!

7/29/17, 7:16 PM

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●●○○○ AT&T 7:41 AM

< Tweet +


 **KharmynBaby**  
@KharmynBaby

Hubs said "I don't think I want 2 visit Spokane @ seeing this! This is NOT helping their tourism!" Spoken like a true tourism guy! [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 7:52 PM from Lewisville, TX

●●○○○ AT&T 7:40 AM

< Tweet +

 **Ron DiBona**  
@evildeadron

Spokane seems to be full of classy people [#LivePD](#)


7/29/17, 8:20 PM

1 Like

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●●○○○ AT&T 7:40 AM

< Tweet +


 **Pet Czar**  
@PetCzar

Spokane needs some hygiene, to put it nicely. [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 8:20 PM

●●○○○ AT&T 7:39 AM

< Tweet +

 **Sarge 4 Tide**  
@sarge4tide

Spokane might be the Bad ink Capital of the USA [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 8:21 PM


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AT&T 7:39 AM

< Tweet +

 Anonymous Covfefe  
@Hockey\_Pro\_Guru

Wow! If heroin & Meth were lethal  
Poisons the Population of #Spokane  
would drop to 300 total.... #Liberal  
Leadership at it's best! #LivePD




7/29/17, 8:21 PM


3 Likes

AT&T 7:39 AM

< Tweet +

 Goriller  
@allRize99


The Spokane Skelton #livePd



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AT&T 7:38 AM

< Tweet +

 Im1CrazyCow/Bobby  
@Im1CrazyCow


#LivePD I'm glad Spokane has some  
of the Crack whores living up there  
now we kicked out of FL, we have  
enough 2To fill our prisons 3 times

7/29/17, 8:45 PM

1 Retweet 1 Like

AT&T 7:38 AM

< Tweet +

 My Nutsack  
@MySweatyNutsack

This looks like an episode of Real  
White Trash of Spokane County  
#LivePD

7/29/17, 8:47 PM

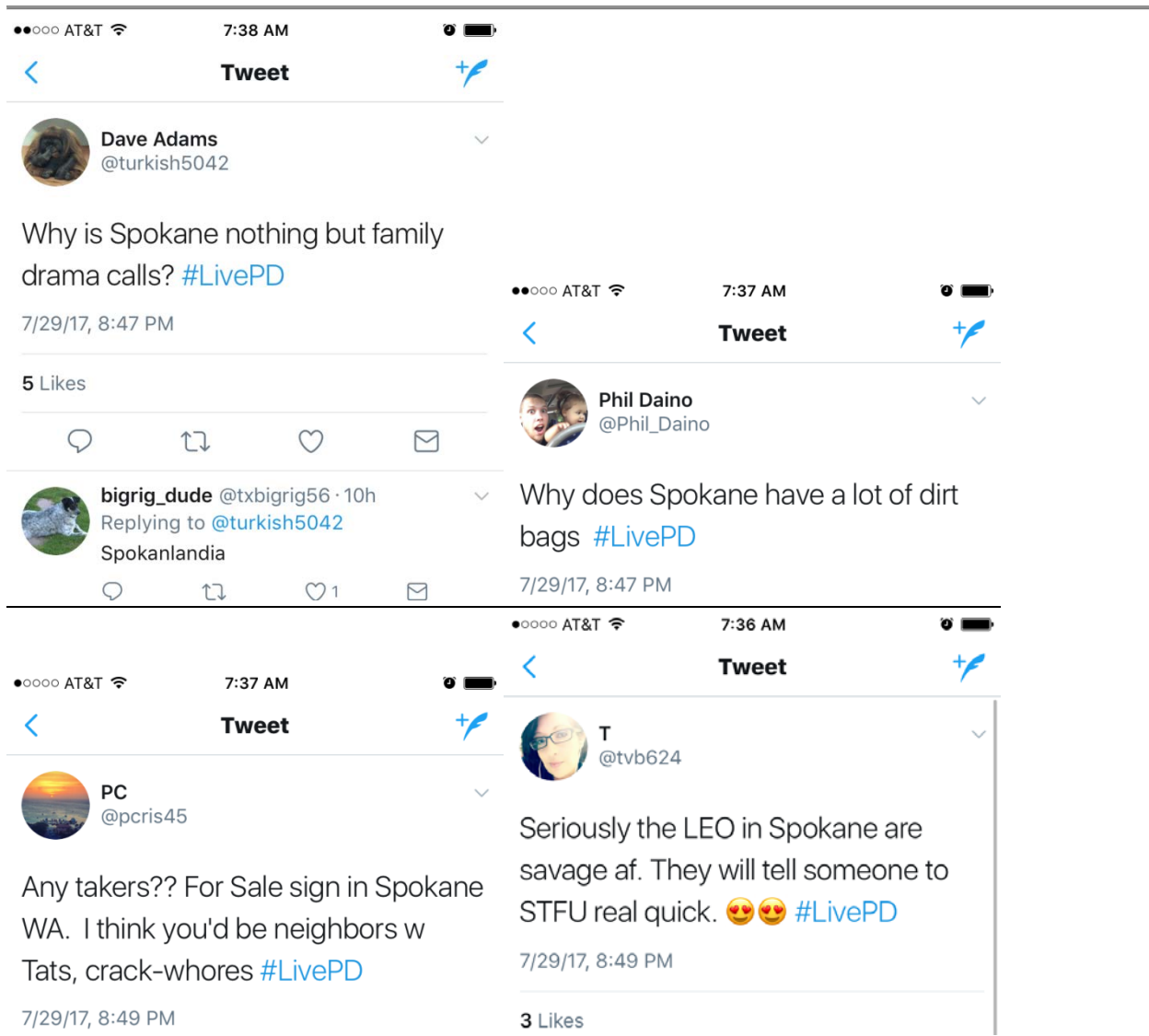
5 Likes

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●●○○○ AT&T 7:35 AM





< Tweet +


**Bill Sutterfield**  
@bsutter10





I'm convinced only 10 people live in  
Spokane #LivePD

7/29/17, 8:56 PM

1 Like




**Mr. Jackpots** @drryanbohannon · 10h  
Replying to @bsutter10  
I was just thinking that.

1

●●○○○ AT&T 7:35 AM

< Tweet +


**Russ Duszak**  
@illiniruss

#LivePD Not exactly a chamber of  
commerce kinda day in Spokane  
today.

7/29/17, 8:57 PM

●●○○○ AT&T 7:34 AM

< Tweet +

**Jill**  
@rjt0726


Spokane County- home of domestic  
violence and bounce back calls!  
@OfficialLivePD #LivePD

7/29/17, 8:57 PM

1 Like

●●○○○ AT&T 7:34 AM

< Tweet +

**Robert**  
@420gobills

#LivePD more trash in spokane if you  
touch me one more time lady 😂😂  
😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

7/29/17, 8:57 PM

1 Retweet 1 Like

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●●●●● AT&T 7:33 AM

< Tweet +

●●●●● AT&T 7:33 AM


< Tweet +

 **StoicLion**  
@StoicLion1973

I love Seattle with everything but  
Spokane on [#LivePD](#) right now 🙄  
[#nevergoingthere](#)  
7/29/17, 8:58 PM  
1 Like

●●●●● AT&T 7:32 AM


< Tweet +

 **bigrig\_dude**  
@txbigrig56

[#LivePD](#) that's it I'm moving to  
Spokane I will look normal there.  
7/29/17, 8:58 PM  
3 Likes

●●●●● AT&T 7:30 AM


< Tweet +

 **Michael Brian**  
@MikeMathia

Well. [#LivePD](#) today I learned that I will  
never ever move to Spokane. Also  
can definitely cross off [#WhiteTrash](#)  
and [#Obama](#) off [@LivePDBingo](#)  
7/29/17, 8:59 PM from Belton, MO  
3 Likes

●●●●● AT&T 7:31 AM

< Tweet +

 **DEPLORABLE Amy**  
@staggs1969


Reference to Spokane...isnt meth a  
wonderful thing???? [#LivePD](#)  
7/29/17, 8:58 PM

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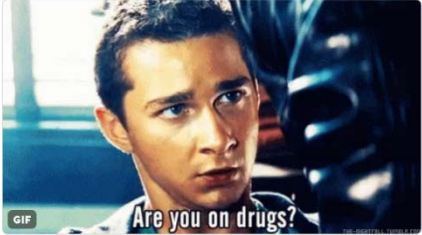
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**Erikalonglegs&clutsy** @LongLeg... · 10h  
Everyone in Spokane on [#livePD...](#)



2 Likes

7:27 AM

**Tweet**




**Britany**  
@Bk\_b1117

Im never moving to Spokane [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 9:02 PM

2 Likes

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**Me**  
@pinkdreamer2015


Seriously??!! What is in the air in Spokane???! She really needs help it's sad. [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 9:13 PM

1 Like

7:27 AM

**Tweet**



**heather gallimore**  
@mrshgallimore

Spokane and their domestic violence disputes. 🙄 [#LivePD](#)

7/29/17, 9:16 PM

2 Likes

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●○○○○ AT&T

7:27 AM

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Tweet

**Karla**  
@KSinCFL

OMG I feel bad for ALL the #Spokane officers, they're expected to be social workers. #LivePD WTH is wrong w/ that place?

7/29/17, 9:48 PM

3 Retweets 8 Likes

**June Clinkenbeard** @MissJitter · 9h  
Replying to @KSinCFL

It's a nice place full of FEELINGS. 🤔

1

●○○○○ AT&T

7:26 AM

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Tweet

**Indiana Geno**  
@Indianafortrump

Is everybody helpless, homeless and dirty in Spokane? #LivePD

7/29/17, 10:14 PM

4 Likes

**Gina**  
@GlimpseofGina

I wonder how many calls those real estate agents are going to get on the house in Spokane. #freeadvertising #LivePD

7/29/17, 11:21 PM

5 Likes

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●○○○○ AT&T


7:26 AM

0

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**Tweet**

+



**Marie!!!**  
@MEschRadtke

That's the white ghetto in Spokane.  
🙄 #LivePD

7/29/17, 11:32 PM

2 Likes

●○○○○ AT&T


7:25 AM

1

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**Tweet**

+



**Christian Warrior**  
@FreeAllCaptives

Spokane seems to have a lot of repeat offenders within the three hour episodes. #LivePD

7/29/17, 11:56 PM

2 Likes

●○○○○ AT&T


7:25 AM

0

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**Tweet**

+



**Eric Winter**  
@EricWinter

#LivePD How are these two hookers. Are standards that low in Spokane.

7/29/17, 11:48 PM from [Georgetown, IN](#)

3 Likes

●○○○○ AT&T


7:24 AM

1

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**Tweet**

+



**Pamela Nielsen**  
@Pamnielsen

WTF is going on with this Spokane County DV call? So confusing! No matter what, seeing a child involved is heartbreaking. #LivePD

7/30/17, 12:21 AM

1 Like

POLICY MEMO

Spokane Police Department Participation in  
"Reality-Based" Police Shows

August 3, 2017

