

RIVERSIDE: Lessons from 1998 police shooting still apply

Riverside police and the community have struggled but mostly overcome the trauma of officers' killing of 19-year-old Tyisha Miller in 1998

BY ALICIA ROBINSON / STAFF WRITER

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DEPARTMENT DIVERSITY

Riverside Police Department's ethnic breakdown has changed since the 1998 fatal shooting of Tyisha Miller, who was black, by four white officers. Today, it has fewer white and black officers, but more of Latino, Asian and other heritages.

WHITE

1998: 75.3%; 2014: 63.4%

LATINO

1998: 14.2%; 2014: 25.1%

BLACK

1998: 9.4%; 2014: 7.5%

ASIAN / AMERICAN INDIAN / OTHER

1998: 1.1%; 2014: 4%

SOURCE: RIVERSIDE POLICE DEPARTMENT

The demonstrators expected in downtown Riverside on Dec. 20 to protest recent police shootings around the country likely won't be thinking about a December night 16 years ago.

That night, less than three miles from the recent rally, Riverside police shot a young black woman as she sat in her car, unconscious, with a gun on her lap.

Riverside learned some hard lessons in the days after Tyisha Miller's 1998 death from police bullets, when controversy over the shooting and accusations of racism thrust the city into the national spotlight. City residents and officials say those lessons could help people in communities such as Cleveland, Staten Island and Ferguson, Mo., that are struggling to recover from their own more recent officer-involved deaths.

"The thing that stands out most is the deterioration of the relationship between the police and the community is never precipitated by a single event," said Joe Brann, a former cop who oversaw required police reforms in Riverside, Maywood, Cincinnati and Seattle.

Across the cities he's observed, Brann said, "There had been increasing problems and volatility between the police department and certain segments of the community for a number of years prior to that."



Joe Brann, who oversaw a five-year agreement between Riverside and the state attorney general to reform the police department, said a public outcry may follow an officer-involved shooting when police and the community already have a rocky relationship.

FILE PHOTO

Fixing those problems takes willingness to change from within the police department, money for better equipment and training, and long-term effort from police and the community, say residents and officials who remember the Miller shooting or were active in events that followed.

“Both sides need to continually work at this,” said Bill Howe, a retired UC Riverside police chief who chaired the city’s first Community Police Review Commission, a citizen panel.

YEARS OF TENSION

Demonstrators around the country have been marching, walking off their jobs and staging “die-ins” in recent months to call attention to the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York City and Tamir Rice in Cleveland, as well as others killed by police.

- Garner, 43, died July 17 after police accused him of selling illegal cigarettes on a Staten Island street and one officer grabbed him in what has been described as a choke hold. Garner was unarmed.
- Brown, 18, was unarmed when he was shot following an Aug. 9 confrontation with a Ferguson police officer, who said Brown assaulted him.
- Rice, 12, was shot by Cleveland police Nov. 22 after a 911 caller reported him pointing a gun at people on a playground. The weapon was a BB gun.

Officials have not announced whether they will file charges in the Cleveland case, but grand jury decisions not to indict police in Ferguson and New York have stoked public anger. The U.S. Justice Department is probing the Brown and Garner cases and was already investigating Cleveland police before Rice was shot.

On Dec. 6, protesters showed up at Riverside’s Festival of Lights, where they blocked traffic and some received minor injuries when a car forced its way through the crowd. Demonstrators have said they plan to return to downtown Riverside this weekend.

When Riverside police shot Tyisha Miller on Dec. 28, 1998, relations between police and the city’s minority communities had been strained for years.

Miller, 19 was sitting in a locked car, apparently unconscious and with a gun on her lap, as she waited for help to fix a flat tire at a gas station. Four white officers responding to a 911 call began shooting when, they said, she reached for the weapon. Miller was hit by 12 bullets. The officers were later fired, but none faced criminal charges.

The incident drew civil rights leaders including Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, who decried the shooting and led marches, and community leaders called for change at the police department.

Before Miller's death, the climate was tense, due to a history of stops and searches by police that black and Latino residents felt were unjustified, the department's lackluster response to complaints about police behavior and a 1971 ambush shooting that killed two officers on duty and left the department on edge, Howe said.



Retired UC Riverside police Chief Bill Howe chaired Riverside's first police review commission, which was created after the 1998 fatal shooting of Tyisha Miller.

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Residents felt the police failed to take public input seriously, said Chani Beeman, who has served on the city's Human Relations Commission, police review commission and police chief's advisory committee.

"There was this attitude of 'We're the experts. You don't know what it's like to be out on the street,'" she said.

To repair the relationship with the community after the Miller shooting, Riverside took a number of steps.

The mayor formed a panel to review the police use of force policy, the new police chief picked a group of community leaders to advise him, and the city's first citizen commission was formed to review public complaints and officer-involved deaths.

An independent citizens' group, the Riverside Coalition for Police Accountability, also acts as a watchdog. Howe is a member.

Though some residents said the city's Community Police Review Commission isn't as effective as they'd like, they and officials agree on its importance in building public trust.

The commission helps reassure people that with controversial or concerning events, "We inside the police department are not the last word. We're not the only ones to review it," police Chief Sergio Diaz said.



Riverside police Chief Sergio Diaz said the department will never reduce use of force incidents to zero, but he hopes to build the community's confidence that police will handle such cases properly.

FILE PHOTO

Diaz was hired in 2010 but is familiar with the reforms that followed Miller's shooting and has continued some of them, such as naming a panel of advisers and creating five-year plans of goals to improve the department.

Some of the biggest police department changes after Miller's death were laid out in an agreement known as a stipulated judgment between Riverside and then-state Attorney General Bill Lockyer, who threatened to sue if the city didn't agree to police reforms.

The first of its kind in the country, the document was a state version of federal consent decrees that mandate changes in departments found to have patterns of discrimination, excessive force or other civil rights violations.

The agreement mandated additional police training as well as video cameras in some police cars and audio recorders worn by all officers. Some officers resented having outsiders give direction to their department, but over time they realized some of the changes could help them, said Lt. Val Graham, who joined the Riverside department in 1989.

Once they got used to the cameras and recorders, Graham said, "I think most officers felt these tools did in fact exonerate some unjust claims from the public."

Part of the problem in the Miller incident was a breakdown in supervision, said Brann, the police reform consultant. That problem was addressed with a policy change. The department had been giving senior officers plum schedules – day shifts, weekends off – and making newer cops work graveyard, leaving few seasoned officers on duty at night. After the shooting, longer-tenured cops were given promotions or extra pay to work later shifts.

Having new leadership at the department that embraced the changes was vital, Brann said. In 2001, Russ Leach was named the new chief.



Riverside police Lt. Valmont Graham said though some officers were initially resistant to reforms following the 1998 shooting of Tyisha Miller, many realized changes such as recording interactions with residents could help clear them of false complaints.

FILE PHOTO

Part of the reform process is holding police accountable, Brann said. Leach “was very clear and very up front with people in the organization that they ... had to accept responsibility for where they were,” he said.

But the change with perhaps the most impact was the move toward community policing, which Diaz continues to employ. To improve problem solving and better connect with the residents it serves, the department has several neighborhood substations. Officers are encouraged to be visible in the community and try to get to the root of issues rather than simply responding to complaints and taking reports.

Jennifer Vaughn-Blakely, who is on Diaz’s advisory committee and heads The Group, a forum that addresses issues in the city’s black community, said Graham and other area commanders come to public meetings, and residents feel comfortable calling them.

“When people see the police at events, when they see them in partnership with the community, then when there’s a problem you can work on it and you don’t have to establish that relationship,” she said.

ONGOING EFFORTS

The bottom line, residents and officials said, is that everyone has a stake in ensuring a well-functioning police department and fostering its relationship with residents.

Not only are crises such as officer-involved deaths traumatic for the community and painful for the department, they can be expensive when they require reform or lead to lawsuits.



Rev. Paul Munford, pastor at Riverside’s New Joy Baptist Church, said that while minorities are often the victims of police violence, it’s an issue everyone needs to work toward solving.

FILE PHOTO

When Riverside was released from its five-year agreement with Lockyer in 2006, the city had spent a reported \$22 million on reforms. It also settled a wrongful death suit with Miller’s family for \$3 million, and faced legal challenges by the officers who were fired as a result of the shooting.

Reducing officer-involved deaths like those of Miller, Garner and others will require work from everyone, and that includes self-examination by police and political participation by those who have been protesting, said Rev. Paul Munford of Riverside’s New Joy Baptist Church. Munford led interfaith healing services in Riverside after Miller’s death and served on a city steering committee created after the shooting.

“We will not get anywhere if this police brutality is just defined by black people or minorities as their concern,” he said.

Longtime Riverside resident Gloria Willis, who protested after Miller’s death and was part of the Dec. 6 demonstration downtown, said that while there’s still room for improvement, the city has made much progress since 1998. That’s due in part to continued pressure from protesters, who marched and held sit-ins for two years after police shot Miller.



Riverside resident Gloria Willis protested after the 1998 shooting of Tyisha Miller, and she recently demonstrated to call attention to police killings in other cities.
FILE PHOTO

People reacting to more recent officer-involved deaths “can learn from us because we were consistent about it,” Willis said.

Diaz said with training, discipline, recruiting more minorities and other tools, the department can reduce the number of “questionable actions” by officers, but it will never get to zero.

“We deal in uncontrolled circumstances,” and officers sometimes have to use force, he said.

Diaz said he hopes that when police shootings and other such incidents occur, residents’ first thoughts will be that while they may not like how it appears, they’ll say, “we know the police, we know they’ll get to the bottom of it, and they will handle it correctly and make it as right as it can be made.”

“We’re not there yet,” he said. “I don’t know if we ever will be there, but I think that’s a vision worth pursuing.”

Contact the writer: 951-368-9461 or arobinson@pe.com