

THE ISSUE OF RACISM AND POLICE SHOOTINGS

Richard B. Parent

Within the American scholarly literature, the issue of racism is frequently stated as a possible explanation for police shootings. Several studies have demonstrated that blacks, within the United States, are shot by the police in numbers significantly disproportionate to their numbers in the local population (Geller & Scott, 1992:149). American researchers have cited various explanations for this phenomenon, including racial bias. Milton (1977) hypothesized that blacks are shot disproportionately because they traditionally have made up a large segment of the unemployment class. Unemployed individuals, regardless of race, are more likely to be involved in confrontations with the police.

In his 1985 paper, "A Balance Of Forces", Kenneth Matulia specifically explores the different variable relationships of justifiable homicide by police. Matulia's findings revealed that while there may be racial prejudice within some members of the police system, prejudice alone does not explain the disproportionate level of black homicide victims. Matulia argues that police use of deadly force has a direct relationship to the conditions that are prevalent in communities that police officers encounter. Specifically he notes that blacks are over-represented as persons arrested for homicide, robbery, violent crimes and weapons offences.

As Matulia points out, the black population within the United States is statistically over-represented in criminal activity. The greater likelihood of their being in conflict with the law may be rooted in their socio-economic background. Poverty and long-term unemployment are seen as significant factors within the black population, forcing many individuals into a life of crime. This situation serves to greatly increase their interaction with the police and specifically use of force incidents. Also noteworthy is that police-shooting

victims are generally young with a greater proportion of the black population being young (Fyfe, 1981).

Geberth (1994) notes a further perspective of racism and police shootings in his paper entitled "*The Racial Component In Suicide-By-Cop Incidents: Public Perception Confused*". Geberth documents incidents where allegations were made by activist members of the black community that the police shooting was racist and unjustified. In many instances, local news media reported the shootings from the perspective of friends and family of the individual killed. An impression was created that the police use of deadly force was unnecessary. This resulted in suggestions by community leaders that the deaths were racially motivated.

"The fatal shooting of a 17 year-old black male occurred on December 1992 when the police had attempted to stop the youth for series of traffic violations. A vehicle pursuit developed when the youth failed to stop for the police, which eventually ended when the subject's car drove onto a front yard of a residence. As the police approached the youth he reached for a gun in the back seat of his car. In response, the officers twice order the subject to drop the weapon. Upon hearing the commands the youth stated 'You'll have to kill me' and then turned and pointed the gun at the police.

The police officers responded to the youth's action by firing four shots. As the youth was being handcuffed he stated 'Please kill me, please kill me.' A check of his weapon revealed that his gun had not been loaded. Further investigation into the incident revealed that the youth was upset with his girlfriend and had told his grandmother that he was going to kill himself or someone else. Relatives confirmed that the youth had been 'acting and talking crazy' and that he had made statements that he was going to kill himself."

This incident was later classified, as being a victim-precipitated shooting and an apparent act of “suicide-by-cop”. In such cases, Geberth emphasizes that police agencies must explain and articulate how and why the police shooting incident took place. This is especially important in victim-precipitated shootings where a visible minority is killed. A lack of timely communication and disclosure can create community unrest, and in some instances, major disturbances.

Police Shootings In Vancouver, B.C.

Roughly two million people reside within the racially diverse area of greater Vancouver, British Columbia. Policing within the city is divided between municipal police agencies and members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. A recent study (Parent, 1996) revealed that eleven of the fourteen individuals (78%) shot and killed by members of municipal police agencies during a fifteen year period between 1980 -1994 were caucasian males. All of the police officers involved in these eleven fatal shootings were also caucasian males. In only three instances (22% of the fatal police shootings) were visible minorities shot and killed by members of municipal police agencies.

In the first incident, an African-Canadian male was shot and killed during an attempted jewellery-store robbery. The suspect was committing a serious criminal offence and fled upon police arrival. An attending male caucasian police officer perceived that a hostage-taking incident was about to occur. In response the officer discharged his firearm and killed the fleeing suspect.

In the second incident, a Vietnamese Canadian male was shot and killed by the police during a hostage-taking incident. It is interesting to note that, during this particular shooting, one of the three police officers involved in this fatal event was also an oriental male.

The third fatal shooting of a non-caucasian occurred when an Aboriginal male was killed as he adopted a “combat shooting position” upon being chased by the police. A male caucasian police officer was conducting a routine patrol of the area when a motel clerk flagged him down. The clerk advised that the aboriginal male had just assaulted him. Upon seeing the arrival of the police, the suspect fled and a foot chase ensued.

During March 1992, two police officers were involved in a foot chase of a male who had just assaulted a Motel clerk. The officers pursued the suspect until he was finally cornered in a parking lot. Upon being cornered the suspect suddenly stopped and turned towards one of the officers. He then reached into the front of his pants and pulled out a black object. The suspect then adopted a combat shooting stance.

The officers responded to the actions of the individual by ordering him to “freeze” and “drop it”. These commands were stated several times but the suspect refused to comply with the police demands. Suddenly the suspect swung around and pointed his hands directly at the police officers while grasping the black object. In response, the officers discharged their firearms, as they believed that the suspect had a firearm in his hand, due to his actions and behaviour.

The suspect fell to the ground and died. Less than three minutes had elapsed from the time that the foot chase began until the subject was shot. Upon checking the individual it was learned that the black object in the suspect’s hand was in fact a black portable radio and that he was unarmed. Why the suspect acted in the manner that he did is unknown.

Summary

In all three of these documented cases, visible minorities were shot and killed by the police during the commission of a criminal offence. A total of six police officers were involved in the three fatal shooting incidents. Five of these six officers were caucasian

males. All of the incidents occurred within the greater Vancouver area, after members of the public had summoned the police for assistance.

Upon conducting a case-by-case examination, the facts and circumstances surrounding each of the fatal shootings are not indicative of an act of racism by police officers. Significantly, the officers interviewed in the three shooting incidents stated that they were exonerated for their actions in dealing with the lethal-threat. The officers stated that they were not charged under the Criminal Code, nor did they face a disciplinary action as a result of their shooting incident. The police officers involved in the fatal shootings were quick to add that in addition, as a result of the Coroner's Inquest, their actions were vindicated within a public forum.

However, initial media reporting emphasized the fact that a member of a visible ethnic minority had been shot and killed by the police. Other media reports insinuated police "wrong-doings" reporting that criminal or disciplinary actions were imminent against the police officers involved. Nonetheless, all of the officers spoken to denied any formal repercussions as a result of their shooting incident.

As this study has documented, in 78% of the fatal police shootings, male caucasian police officers have shot and killed male caucasian individuals. Although visible minorities have been shot and killed by police personnel, the frequency rate of 22% is within the parameters of the 24% visible minority population within the Vancouver area (Statistics Canada, 1995).

Source: Parent, Richard B. (2003) *Police Use of Deadly Force In North America*. Unpublished Doctorial Thesis. Simon Fraser University.