



Authorities missteps, on top of years of racial tension, fueled unrest in Ferguson

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FERGUSON, MO. The Rev. Tommie Pierson was meeting in his church a week ago Saturday when, only blocks away, multiple bullets fired from a Ferguson police officer's pistol pierced the body of Michael Brown, leaving the unarmed African-American teen dead on the street.

"Not until I saw the news that night and saw how many times the boy had been hit, and that they left him in the street for hours, did I know this was going to be something more than average," Pierson said.

But by that time, anger in this St. Louis suburb had begun to boil.

No one reached out to Pierson. Not the mayor. Not police. Not county officials. But the pastor at Greater St. Mark Family Church knew he needed to do something.

As protests grew the day after the shooting, "we offered our services to step up there and try to reach these young people," recalled Pierson, who is also a Democratic state representative. "But there was no offer for us to play a real, significant role in putting down the demonstration. ...

"I think that was a mistake."

Indeed, it would be one among many that in the ensuing five days would guide this suburb into a kind of racial calamity and police havoc that experts in criminal justice said never needed to happen.

When the full story of the Ferguson riot is written, these experts suggested, the heftiest criticism will fall not just on the police use of riot gear, gas bombs, rubber bullets and body armor that further inflamed a volatile public. It will focus equally on how officials, in light of racial tension and changing demographics, had utterly failed years ago to engender the crucial trust that is needed between police and its citizens to prevent such eruptive violence.

For Ferguson to heal, they said, it is exactly such trust that will be needed — a process that could take years.

“When you see something like this,” Kansas City Police Chief Darryl Forté said of the Ferguson violence, “you know there was some dysfunction before this. It is a much larger issue than someone being shot. I see people crying out, saying, ‘Something’s wrong. We need something different here.’ This is something where the frustration has been building for some time.”

Violence returned to the town Friday night and into early Saturday when protesters clashed with police at a convenience store before calm was restored. Later Saturday, a curfew was placed on residents.

But since Thursday, the overall intensity of protests in Ferguson had calmed significantly after the Missouri Highway Patrol was put in charge of security. Officials from the U.S. Department of Justice already had been called in to help quell tensions while the FBI and the St. Louis County prosecutor continue investigations into Brown’s shooting. Other Justice officials are looking into possible civil rights violations.

But before that, the world witnessed five days of fulminating ire as people in and around this St. Louis County suburb of 21,000 demanded more than what they considered to be an unlikely explanation for the young man’s death — that Brown scuffled with police and was shot multiple times after reaching for an officer’s gun.

From all appearances, the police shooting of an unarmed teen had overnight ignited a bonfire of long-festering animosity in a town where most officials are white and its residents, two-thirds of whom are black, had complained for years about police harassment.

On the night of Aug. 10, a QuikTrip was looted and set ablaze. Over the days that followed, local police with riot shields used rubber bullets, tear gas, smoke and sonic cannons to disperse angry, stone-throwing crowds. Some residents hurled Molotov cocktails.

Even while others sat and prayed at church vigils and President Barack Obama urged peace, military-clad police officers tossed protesters in jail by the dozens.

“In an American city, people are being tear gassed and snipers are pointing rifles at them,” St. Louis Alderman Antonio French told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on Thursday morning after he was placed in jail overnight along with others who had gathered near the protests.

“Everybody should be upset. ... Heavy-handed police approach is actually making the situation worse.”

The situation had been bad long before.

Primed to ignite

Because of that lack of trust, experts said, Ferguson was fueled to explode.

This is a city where, The Daily Beast website reported Friday, an African-American man in 2009 was charged with destruction of property “for bleeding on (police officers’) uniforms while four of them allegedly beat him.”

Forté described Brown’s death as a “flashpoint” — an incident that erupts suddenly and violently following mounting friction and frustration within a community.

That anger only intensified as Ferguson’s police chief, Thomas Jackson, refused to release the name of the officer who shot Brown. Only at a news conference Friday morning did Jackson identify the officer as Darren Wilson, 28, a six-year veteran with four years on the Ferguson force.

Whether flashpoint incidents foment into something more, such as rioting, Forté said, hinges on trust and credibility.

As part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the U.S. Department of Justice created its Community Relations Service to act as a “peacemaker” to help address community conflicts arising from race. On the topic of “Police Use of Force,” a Justice Department document expressly states:

“Where there are good police-community relations and high confidence within the minority community in the integrity and accountability of the police department, a use of force incident may result in little turmoil.

“However, in communities where there is a lack of confidence between police and minority residents and a perception that complaints about police misconduct will not be addressed fairly, no issue can be more racially explosive or more easily lead to violent disturbances.”

A prime example: April 29, 1992, when six days of rioting and looting erupted in south-central Los Angeles. It was the day a majority-white jury acquitted four L.A. police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King.

King’s beating was captured on [videotape](#) by another citizen. Police officers alleged that King was violent and high on PCP when they stopped and subdued him after a police chase. But tests would later show King had no PCP in his system.

The acquittal of the officers, who were predominantly white, by a mostly white jury ignited a community that had for years complained of a police force riddled with prejudice, discrimination and a history of racial brutality.

By the time the riots subsided, 52 people were dead and more than 2,000 were injured, some 1,100 buildings were damaged and 3,000 fires were set.

“Every community and every situation is different,” said Darnell Hunt, who has studied the L.A. riots as director of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA. “When you are dealing with unfortunate tragedies like this (Ferguson) shooting, it becomes a question of trust, a question of whose version you’re going to believe.

“And if there is a history of racial profiling, of police brutality, people are going to be reluctant to place their trust in the police. I think that is what we’re dealing with in St. Louis. People in St. Louis don’t believe, don’t trust, the official version of what happened. That is what it boils down to.”

No trust without transparency

Indeed, the release of information about Brown’s death has been so disjointed as to leave many residents skeptical and surmising for themselves the truth of the events.

“The more transparent a department can be, the more logical and credible the information, the more likely you will be to calm some anger,” said Delores Jones-Brown, a former prosecutor and founder in New York of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice’s Center on Race, Crime and Justice. “But if a department doesn’t provide information, or continues to provide information that lacks credibility, it only fuels the flame.”

Another fundamental mistake, she said: “Victim blaming is always bad.”

Only on Friday did police give a broader picture of events leading up to Brown’s death, but even then the information was confusing.

Brown was killed about noon Aug. 9. Initial reports early in the week gave only a limited account of Brown’s death, saying he had possibly reached for a Ferguson police officer’s gun during a scuffle at a police car. That scuffle, which also injured the officer, allegedly spilled into the street, where Brown was shot multiple times.

But on Friday morning, at the same news conference where Jackson identified the officer, the chief also distributed a police report implicating Brown in a strong-arm robbery of a nearby convenience store shortly before the shooting. The robber took a \$48.99 box of Swisher Sweets cigars.

The implication perceived by residents and Brown’s family: Wilson may have stopped Brown because he was a suspect in the robbery.

Then, at a later news conference Friday afternoon, Jackson clarified that Wilson did not know Brown was a suspect at the time he stopped him, but instead stopped Brown only because he and a friend “were walking down the middle of the street, blocking traffic.” Jackson said he released the crime report to fulfill multiple media document requests.

But the implication and subsequent turnaround outraged Brown’s family and other residents. While Brown’s friend Dorian Johnson, 22, has acknowledged that Brown took cigars from the store, Brown’s supporters saw the release of the robbery report as an attempt to blame the shooting victim.

Johnson had given his own account of the shooting to media throughout the week. He said he and Brown were walking in the street when an officer in his car ordered the two men to get out of the road. When the officer stopped and opened his door, Johnson said, the officer opened it near enough to him and Brown that the door “ricocheted” back, upsetting the officer.

Johnson said the officer grabbed Brown’s neck and a scuffle ensued. Johnson said that when Brown tried to get away from the officer, the officer pursued Brown and fired his weapon multiple times. Johnson said Brown already had stopped on the street, with his hands in the air, when the officer fired at him.

“He wasn’t causing harm to nobody. We had no weapons on us at all,” Johnson told local media.

In 2001, it was also the shooting of a black teen that provoked rioters to fight police and loot stores for four nights in and around Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine neighborhood.

The spark then was the police shooting of 19-year-old Timothy Thomas, also by a white police officer. That killing was seen as yet one more in a fatal pattern.

“We had 15 black men killed by police from 1995 to 2001,” recalled the Rev. Damon Lynch III, who was then a leader in the Black United Front, a Cincinnati civil rights group. “Like you guys are having now, we had three days of civil unrest.”

The flashpoint, Lynch said, followed what he called 2 in 24, the deaths of two black men in 24 hours at the hands of Cincinnati police. Race relations in the city, he said, already had been severely strained by years of perceived racial discrimination. In the months before the riots, the Black United Front had filed a lawsuit in federal court, accusing the city of profiling.

“It was just an oppressive city,” Lynch said.

Fatigue in Ferguson

All week, Ferguson’s black residents have spoken about their long-standing anger at the local police, a force of 52 officers, just three of whom are black.

In the 1970s, only a handful of black families lived in Ferguson, a suburb just northwest of St. Louis. But over the decades, while the town’s governing powers have remained primarily white, the black population according to the 2010 census has grown to 67 percent, up from 52 percent just a decade earlier.

“The whole system is guilty!” crowds chanted on the streets of Ferguson last week.

“A black male is constantly going to face harassment,” said Stefan Hornaday, 21, a graduate of McCluer High School in neighboring Florissant. He said he was tear gassed on Monday as he protested near the QuikTrip.

“You get harassed for nothing,” Hornaday said. “I got stopped by a cop when I had just gotten off the bus. The cop said there had just been a bunch of break-ins. Why are you assuming that’s me? No one wants to deal with the police anymore.”

Zachariah Williams, 19, of Ferguson found himself in jail for 24 hours after being picked up at a Monday afternoon protest.

“I understand the police have to do their job and prevent violence,” Williams said, “but that doesn’t give you a free pass to abuse your authority.”

Piaget Crenshaw, 19, who lives in an apartment complex near where Brown was shot, said she saw Michael Brown’s body lying for four to five hours on the city street.

“There is a lot of animosity right now between the community and the police,” she said. “It doesn’t just appear here overnight. It’s been building. ... People are just angry and frustrated. They feel like it took a murder for them to finally get their voices heard and for people to take notice of what’s going on. I don’t support the violence, but they feel like they’ve never been heard.”

Forté said that few cities are immune to the possibility of such flashpoint riots.

In June 1996, Kansas City police donned riot gear and tossed smoke bombs to disperse a mob of nearly 100 people at 27th Street and Benton Boulevard. The crowd had gathered in anger over a police officer who shot and wounded a 21-year-old African-American man suspected of selling drugs. Police said the officer shot the man after he pointed a gun at the officer.

After the shooting, the crowd seemed to leave but then returned in larger numbers. Some 20 officers were called in, most in helmets, carrying batons and shields. About three dozen people, mostly young men, began hurling bottles and rocks, prompting police to toss four smoke bombs.

Instead of continuing to confront the protesters head-on or make arrests, police were ordered to get in their cars and fall back, first to 23rd Street and Benton and then even farther, to 18th Street and Prospect Avenue. With no further confrontation, the crowd dispersed.

Likewise, in Louisville, Ky., the shooting death in 2004 of 19-year-old Michael Newby by a white police officer had the potential of inciting rioting. Newby had been the seventh black man killed by police in five years.

Although the incident sparked protests, they never ignited. The city had just recently hired an African-American police chief, Robert White, now in Denver.

“White came in and he was able to take a serious look, and people trusted what he said,” said Raoul Cunningham, president of the Louisville chapter of the NAACP.

The officer, indicted on murder charges, eventually was acquitted.

Repair and rebuild

Forté said that enlightened law enforcement fosters trust, credibility and transparency — and prevents clashes.

Its hallmarks include active listening to citizens and giving them a voice, he said. It means using community policing to engender trust between police and residents, and building relationships with community leaders.

“Then when you have that flashpoint,” Forté said, “you have the leaders who believe in you, and trust you, and who will speak for you.”

Those leaders can include clergy, city council members, youth organizers and other individuals who — despite criminal histories or because of them — command respect.

“One guy I talk to regularly was in the penitentiary for five years for drugs,” Forté said. “He’s a real good adviser.”

For Ferguson to move forward, others said, trust will need to be built anew. It’s not impossible.

“The best opportunities for regrouping and repairing and moving forward come from events like this,” said Rod K. Brunson, an associate professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University.

In Cincinnati, Lynch, the minister, said the public relations shame of the riots, coupled with the federal lawsuit, led to many positive changes — and others that are still contentious.

Millions of dollars have been invested in the once blighted Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, a move that remains controversial. Punished in the riots, the urban area has become one of Cincinnati’s trendier neighborhoods, with hip shops, galleries and restaurants.

The problem is that some claim that project is less an example of successful urban renewal and more urban “removal,” less revitalization and more “*rewhitealization*,” that has forced poor black people out of the area and attracted wealthier whites.

“The basic answer to the riots,” said Brian Garry, a community organizer, “was to get rid of these people.”

Lynch said he thinks Garry’s criticism has validity, but Lynch also thinks that civil unrest led to good.

“Togetherness actually came out of it,” he said, as did significant changes in city law enforcement.

Chief among the changes was the establishment of a citizen complaint and internal audit department designed to investigate allegations of misconduct by police officers, including shots fired, deaths in custody and use of force.

It tracks officers who have had bad interactions with the public.

“Heretofore,” Lynch said, “they would tell you that it is just one bad apple. Well, we want to know. Who are these bad apples?”

Police meet regularly with the public. The department also has hired more minority officers. The police chief and his predecessor are African-American.

Since the 1992 riots, the Los Angeles Police Department has undergone its own overhaul. Various city surveys have shown improved relations with police.

Yet on Monday, police in Los Angeles were dealing with their own fatal shooting of an unarmed man. While it led to protests, it did not ignite a riot.

Police say Ezell Ford, a 25-year-old African-American, wheeled on them and reached for an officer’s gun after Ford was approached on a sidewalk for “an investigative stop.” Police thought he was acting suspiciously. The incident is being investigated as others claim that Ford, who was mentally ill, was shot by police after he had already been subdued.

On New York's Staten Island, an investigation is still going on in the death of Eric Garner, 43, an African-American man killed last month from a choke hold as an officer arrested him for allegedly selling untaxed cigarettes.

Indeed, some hold that as long as deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of law enforcement are a recurring storyline, trust may always be hard to come by.

"It's very difficult," Lynch said of the process in Cincinnati. "There will always be remnants of distrust."

In St. Louis County, nurturing a new trust is the only option.

"Because this distrust has been going on for so long, it's going to take many years," said Michelle Foster, 47, of Florissant. "I may not live to see where we as a community can trust police officers who are not the same color we are."

"We are tired of police officers committing crimes against our children."