

A Community Unraveled: Police Shooting in Ferguson, MO

Charles P. Wilson, Rhode Island College Campus Police
Shirley A. Wilson, Bryant University

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Introduction

Had the police department done enough to address community concerns regarding perceptions of racial discrimination and police abuse? Race relations and discord in Ferguson, MO had been tense for a number of years (Strassmann, 2014). Many local residents viewed the police department as racist and anti-community because of their past dealings with the Ferguson Police Department (FPD). Portions of these feelings were no doubt founded in the fact that, while the city's population was predominantly African American, the police department was comprised of nearly all white males. This relationship had now come to a dramatic peak with the police shooting of a young, unarmed African American teenager. Regardless of who was responsible for this situation, one thing was certain. Ferguson, MO was in a crisis situation. The question was could it have been handled better.

The Community

Established in the 1850s as Ferguson Station, the city became one of the first in St. Louis County to adopt a council-manager form of government. With a total 2010 census population of 21,203, 67.4% of its residents were African American. Coupled with a 22% overall poverty rate, there were strong correlations to high unemployment, crime, and educational disadvantage.

The governance of the city, however, did not reflect its racial makeup. The mayor and police chief were white, as were 94% of the police department. Six of the school board members were white, with one Hispanic member. Only one of its six-member city council was black. So it seemed that the city's largest population has little or no political capital. Discriminatory practices were alleged to run rampant in nearly every facet of government (DOJ, 2015). Strong evidence of this was shown in the fact that eighty seven percent of all traffic stops made by the police were African American citizens, while 81% of all searches were the same (Diversity Inc, 2015).

The Incident That Started It All

Although police and witnesses gave different accounts of what actually happened in the moments immediately before the shooting, it was determined that Officer Darren Wilson, a White male officer with six years of service on the Ferguson Police Department, observed two young African American males, later identified as Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson, walking in the center of the street. Officer Wilson initially confronted the two young men and, according to Johnson's statement, cursed at them, telling them to "Get the f*** out of the street." The young men allegedly stated that they were only moments away from their final destination and would be out of the street shortly. Officer Wilson then drove away but, for whatever reason, stopped, backed up and returned.

At some point a struggle ensued between Brown and Officer Wilson near Wilson's patrol vehicle, at which time police indicate Brown tried to take Wilson's service weapon and allegedly physically assaulted Wilson while he was still in his patrol vehicle. A shot was fired. Brown then was reported to run away from the vehicle. Officer Wilson then was said to have exited his vehicle and began to pursue Brown and Johnson. Several more shots were fired by the officer, while Brown was allegedly facing him with his hands raised in a sign of submission, resulting in Brown falling face-down to the ground, dying from his wounds, some 20-30 feet away from the site of the initial struggle. It was later determined that Brown was unarmed.

Other officers responded almost immediately to the scene of the shooting. The area was taped off, access restricted, yet Brown's body remained where it lay, uncovered and visible to the public, for more than four hours.

Community members and Brown's family immediately became alarmed at the shooting, with several people providing conflicting accounts of what happened in the moments immediately preceding the shooting. No one disputed, however, that there was some form of altercation between Brown and the police officer, and that Brown was unarmed when he was shot (CBS News, 2014).

The Immediate Aftermath of the Shooting

Chaos now reigned supreme in Ferguson. Days of mostly peaceful, sometimes violent protests occurred, with community members and outsiders seeming to take over the streets nightly. Ferguson Police Department initially responded to these demonstrations by deploying officers in military-style riot gear backed up by armored vehicles, tear-gas, and stun grenades. This war-like response gave the impression that the police considered members of the community as enemy combatants, rather than disenchanting, frustrated protesters (ACLU, 2014).

Police officers had serious concerns about their safety as people threw rocks and bottles at them during the protests, and there were reports of shots being fired. This made police attitudes and perceptions of the protesters strained, to say the least, as many officers were quite vocal in their support for Officer Wilson.

Little to no information was being released due to what was defined as an on-going investigation of the shooting. The officer's name was not being released publicly because of what was being described as threats that had been made against the officer's life.

Soon, national attention was focused on the shooting, with even the President of the United States commenting on the racial unrest and distrust of the police. The Governor of the state eventually called out the State Highway Patrol to take over policing activities in Ferguson, placing an African American Highway Patrol Captain, Captain Ron Johnson, in charge, as well as activating units of the National Guard.

For a while, the violence associated with the demonstrations subsided, with Captain Johnson often seen to be walking side-by-side with protestors. Brown's family called upon the community to remain calm and peaceful in their protests, but to continue their call for justice for their son, demanding that the officer involved be criminally charged with murder. When Ferguson Police finally released Officer Wilson's name to the public, they also released information that implicated Brown and Johnson in a strong-armed robbery shortly before the shooting. Further, they included an excerpt of video surveillance that showed Brown presumably stealing a package of small cigars from a convenience store nearby. Captain Johnson initially voiced astonishment at hearing this, indicating a lack of informational follow-thru between local and state authorities. There was also no information indicating that the original officer involved had been aware of these circumstances immediately before the shooting. In fact, it was later stated that this was not the reason for the original police interaction with Brown.

These revelations, however, only served to further inflame the protestors' feelings of outrage and distrust, resulting in weeks of violent protests accusing the police of racial profiling, undue abusive acts against people of color, and calling for the arrest of the officer involved in the shooting. Some protestors attacked police with guns, rocks and bottles, and vandalized and looted several business establishments in the area. Several people were placed under arrest for their actions in violating the law. Community members were further dismayed by the involvement of the County District Attorney, who was felt to be too closely aligned with law enforcement to render a fair decision on the shooting, and called for his recusal.

As the protests continued, the District Attorney, who could have filed a formal complaint against the officer, chose instead to present the case to a specially formed grand jury, whose deliberations would be closed to the public. The mostly white City Council declared that they would now consider measures for reforming court procedures, the way certain fines were handled and the possibility of establishing a police-community review board. And the United States Department of Justice indicated that they would now become involved in an investigation of the shooting, as well as conduct what is known as a "patterns and practices" investigation of the Ferguson Police Department itself.

But for now, the community had an out of control crisis situation. Whether or not the grand jury issued an indictment against the police officer, the question remained what could have been done to manage the situation better.

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