

Police Violence is Not Inevitable

In the wake of a Missouri grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown on August 9, it can be difficult to imagine a city in the United States where a police department and a largely black and Latino population work together productively.

But it's happening in Richmond, California, a gritty town in the San Francisco Bay Area best known for its massive Chevron refinery and, in past years, for its high crime rate.

Thanks to a decade-long experiment with "community policing," violent crime in Richmond is down. Last year, this city of 100,000 had only 16 killings—the lowest number in 33 years—and far fewer unsolved homicide cases.

Gun use by the Richmond Police Department (RPD) itself is also way down. Despite making thousands of arrests and confiscating one gun or more every day in the city, the RPD has averaged less than one officer-involved shooting per year since 2008. On September 6, *The Contra Costa Times* ran a story, citing these and other statistics. It was headlined: "Use of Deadly Force by Police Disappears on Richmond Streets."

Police Chief Chris Magnus has been widely credited with implementing the reforms that led to these changes. In recognition of Richmond's progress, and Magnus's role in it, the U.S. Department of Justice recently added him to the panel of experts investigating the breakdown of police-community relations in Ferguson.

Magnus was unable to comment about the status of that inquiry or what recommendations might be made regarding the Ferguson police department. Magnus does believe that Michael Brown's death and related civil unrest last summer has had one

positive, far-reaching effect.

“More communities are now taking a closer look at what’s going on in their own police departments and whether it meets their needs, including on issues involving race and diversity,” he said. “A critical look at any institution with as much power and authority invested in it as the police is probably a good thing.”

A Community Policeman

When Magnus first interviewed for the job of Richmond police chief in 2005, Richmond was notorious for its violent crime, youth gangs, illegal drugs, and troubled relations between police officers and city residents.

The city’s search committee wanted to hire a new chief who could reduce crime by reconnecting the police department to the people it serves. Those vetting Magnus were duly impressed with his credentials as just this kind of public safety reformer.

Unfortunately for Magnus, there was the little matter of his previous posting. As police chief of Fargo, North Dakota, he hailed from one of the safest and whitest places in America. Fargo averages one homicide every two years, plus a famous Hollywood film by the same name helped make it synonymous with sleepy, small-town policing in the upper-Midwest.

Richmond is not much bigger than real-life Fargo, but definitely poorer and more than 80 percent nonwhite. A decade ago, it was about to record an annual homicide rate of 47 per year. In terms of homicides per capita, Richmond was among the most dangerous places in the United States.

City officials in Fargo said Magnus had been effective during his 6 years as police chief there. Could his success dealing with “quality of life” issues in rural America be replicated in an urban environment with far greater racial diversity and

no shortage of social dysfunction?

“I really thought Fargo would be a disqualifier for me because of the demographics of the city,” he told *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 2005. Richmond’s municipal leaders, including Gayle McLaughlin, a Green Party member who will step down as mayor in January, decided that Magnus was the right man for the job anyway. Richmond hired Magnus in December 2005, and he has served throughout McLaughlin’s two terms as mayor.

Magnus took one unusual step right away. Although most Richmond police officers live outside the city, he bought a home near downtown. From there, he could bicycle to work but, when he was off-duty, never get far from the daily challenges he faced. At home, he could hear police sirens late into the night, the occasional shot being fired, and members of his neighborhood association knocking on his door to report crimes nearby. (Since marrying Terrance Cheung, a top assistant to a county supervisor, Magnus has moved to a quieter part of Richmond, near the city outskirts.)

In several recent interviews, Magnus explained what it took to re-orient police work in Richmond and establish greater trust in the department. During his nine years as chief, RPD reforms have fall into four main categories.

1) Rewarding community connections

Magnus began the process of change in Richmond by reshuffling the department’s command structure and promoting like-minded senior officers.

He also ended the practice of putting “street teams” into high crime neighborhoods, where they would “roust anybody who’s out walking around, with the idea that they might have a warrant outstanding or be holding drugs.” In his view, that approach only “serves to alienate the whole population that lives in those neighborhoods,” most of whom are “good people not engaged in crime.”

Patrol officers were given more regular beats and directed to spend more time on foot, rather than in squad cars. Their job evaluations and career advancement are now tied to the success of their community engagement and individual relationship building.

“We assign people for longer periods of time to specific geographic areas with the expectation that they get to know and become known by residents,” Magnus explains. “They are in and out of businesses, nonprofits, churches, a wide variety of community organizations, and they come to be seen as a partner in crime reduction. Our idea is that you’re not going to be able to just arrest your way out of crime, but that you have to develop a wide range of strategies that involve community members as partners to really improve public safety.”

2) Diversifying the Force

As chief, Magnus has made it a top priority to hire and promote more women, Asians, Latinos, and/or African-Americans.

“When you have a department that doesn’t look anything like the community it serves, you’re asking for trouble, no matter how dedicated and professional your employees are,” he says. “So an ongoing mission for us here is to hire the highest quality people that represent that diversity of the community, across the board. I don’t even just mean from a racial, ethnic, or gender standpoint. I mean in terms of life experiences, being connected to neighborhoods, growing up either in Richmond or cities like Richmond.”

The RPD has changed record-keeping systems since Magnus took office, making it difficult to compare diversity figures directly. But, according to Deputy Chief Allwyn Brown, about 40 percent of the department’s 182 active police officers are white, while the remaining 60 percent are from minority groups. There are now 26 female officers on the force,

including highly visible leaders like Captain Bisa French and Lieutenant Lori Curran.

3) Partnering with neighborhood groups

Under Magnus, the RPD has worked closely with the Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), a city hall-based program which deploys a network of street-smart youth mentors to identify teenagers most at risk of joining gangs or engaging in gun violence.

ONS has enrolled scores of young men and women in a "Peacemaker Fellowship," designed to provide job training, counseling, and financial support to young people who agree to abandon a life of crime. *Mother Jones* hailed the program as a way for the city "to bring down its murder rate by paying people not to kill."

In a city with frequent marches and demonstrations, the RPD has also distinguished itself for working with community organizers to minimize street protest tensions. Even the RPD's handling of large-scale disobedience, like a sit-in in 2013 at the entrance to the Chevron refinery or more recent skirmishing about the transportation of crude oil through the city by train, won praise from activists wary of most other law enforcement agencies.

According to Andres Soto, a native of Richmond and a leading environmental justice campaigner, the city has come a long way from the days when "there were not a lot of professional standards" in the hiring of new officers. Years ago, he recalls, Richmond employed too many "ex-military, thuggish cops and rednecks" whose behavior led to costly police brutality cases and civil rights suit settlements.

"It can be helpful for officers to have had military experience," Magnus points out. "But, at the same time, we also want people who can shift gears ... and be able to interact, in a very different way, with community members, who

can show empathy with victims of crime, who are not afraid to smile, to get out of the police car and interact in a positive way with people, who can demonstrate emotional intelligence, who are good listeners, who have patience, who don't feel that it takes away from their authority to demonstrate kindness."

4) Better Training and Non-Lethal Weaponry

Magnus has consistently promoted new training programs and the acquisition of non-lethal weaponry, including Tasers, designed to minimize the use of deadly force.

Richmond now participates, along with five other cities, in a nationwide Violence Reduction Network, sponsored by the United States Department of Justice. The network is supporting an upcoming RPD seminar on "procedural justice" that will focus, in part, on the problem of "unconscious bias" in police interactions with the public.

To conduct this training, Magnus has enlisted the services of University of South Florida criminologist Lorie Fridell, who has researched and written about the problem of law enforcement officers acting, unfairly, based on unconscious associations between crime and members of racial minorities.

An Officer Involved Shooting

Conditions in Richmond don't permit police reformers to rest on their laurels for long. On September 14, there was a fatal encounter between Wallace Jensen, an officer on foot patrol, and 24-year-old Richard Pedro Perez III.

Already on probation for a previous gun incident, Perez was intoxicated and resisted arrest after a liquor store clerk reported that he had been shoplifting. According to the responding officer, Perez tried to wrestle his gun away. The three bullets fired at Perez resulted in Richmond's first deadly "officer-involved shooting" since 2007.

Some in Perez's family wondered why the officer failed to use his Taser or nightstick to subdue the deceased. "These are serious questions asked by a community who pays for police enforcement tools," editorialized *La Voz*, a bi-lingual newspaper published by activists involved in the Richmond Progressive Alliance, which backs Mayor McLaughlin.

The Perez family retained a civil rights lawyer, who has threatened to sue the city. Meanwhile, Perez's aunt invited Chris Magnus to the funeral, which he and Deputy Chief Brown attended in civilian clothes.

Magnus also deployed his social media skills to disseminate detailed information about how parallel investigations of the incident are being conducted by the RPD's Professional Standards Unit and the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office. (RPD maintains a website, a Facebook page, and the chief's own Twitter account to fulfill its organizational "commitment to transparency and openness," plus solicitation of citizen feedback even if "questioning or critical.")

"One of the things we tried to convey is that we have genuine sympathy for the family and acknowledge that the death of this young man is tragic," Magnus said, noting that the "officer involved had to make a very tough decision in a matter of seconds."

The Perez case led to a single protest by 35 to 40 people at RPD headquarters but many other residents seem to have reserved judgment about Officer Jensen. As one well-known Richmond progressive told me, "Most people had a lot of confidence that the police would look into it and deal with it." Jensen remains on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of the two investigations into his conduct.

The setting being Richmond, not Ferguson, both Perez and Jensen were Latino and fellow Spanish-speakers. The officer involved has no reported history of using excessive force. As

a member of the RPD's crisis negotiation team, he had received regular training on how to handle violent situations.

Nevertheless, on the mean streets of Richmond, even a model for better policing and more trusting relationships with the community is now being tested once again.

It took supportive city leadership and nearly a decade of institutional change to get this far—an indication of how long and difficult the road ahead will be in cities where progressive influence is weaker and police reform far more contested.

(Steve Early wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas and practical actions. Early is a journalist and author who lives in Richmond, California. He belongs to the Richmond Progressive Alliance and is currently working on a book about progressive public policy initiatives and political change in the city. He can be reached at Lsupport@aol.com.)