

Jerry Dyer: A return to community policing in Fresno

By Jerry
Dyer

Over the past month, I have been asked repeatedly by people throughout Fresno if what occurred in Ferguson, Mo., could happen in Fresno.

No, I do not believe it could. Yes, we have a diverse community, but not a divided community. We have a department that is reflective of the community and a very different style of policing, especially when it comes to dealing with civil unrest. Yet, it is my belief that we still have much room for improvement in terms of police-community relations, and the sensitive issue of race within our community.

What happened in Ferguson, although largely distorted by the national media, will serve as a defining moment in our country. The level of trust and confidence communities have in their police departments will either grow or diminish depending how law enforcement chooses to serve them.

Every big city in America has the potential for civil unrest and large-scale demonstrations. This is especially true in communities where the style of policing has become more focused on crime reduction through aggressive enforcement, and less on building relationships with the community. Fighting crime without alienating those we serve is a delicate balance law enforcement must continually strive to achieve.

I am concerned that so many of us in law enforcement are so intensely focused on fighting gangs, reducing crime, arresting criminals, and getting to the next emergency call as quickly as we can, that we have lost sight of why we do these things in the first place. Measuring crime statistics, response times to calls, and arrests have become the focus. I too, am guilty of this.

In many respects, our profession has forgotten what community policing looks like. Problem-solving and Community Oriented Policing have taken a back seat to "Data Driven Policing." Why? Mainly because police chiefs and elected officials are measured by crime rates, and police resources have become scarce, especially in California.

Although we cannot take our eye off the need to reduce crime, law enforcement leaders must spend much more time focusing on the quality of interaction between our officers and citizens, solving neighborhood problems and addressing many of the social disorders that contribute to unhealthy neighborhoods.

We must find a way to put community first and crime rates a close second if we are truly going to gain the support and trust of our citizens. Just look at New York City and the incredible crime reductions it has had, yet it has lost the support of the people in many of these neighborhoods that were once plagued by violence. This has been acknowledged by New York Police Department Commissioner Bill Bratton, the author of "CompStat" and "Data Driven Policing."

For a period of time, an aggressive style of policing involving significant numbers of arrests was not only accepted, but desired by neighborhoods plagued by gangs. However, with the dramatic reductions in crime experienced over the years combined with the overcrowding of prisons and jails, expectations have changed. These same neighborhoods that once begged for an increased police presence now may view law enforcement as an occupying force. People want a return to "Community Policing." What that really means is they want to see the human side of our profession and not the tactical side.

In the wake of the Ferguson riots, a new concern has become the "militarization" of policing. This term is not new, but is subject to interpretation. Since the inception of police academies, law enforcement has been referred to as a paramilitary organization. Police academies are structured after military basic training. Cadets march in formation,

say "Yes sir; no, sir," and have uniform inspections. When they become officers, they wear uniforms, carry firearms, use specialty equipment and tactically deploy. Even the organizational hierarchy is designed after the military.

With the increased presence of gang violence and assault weapons on our streets, coupled with a growing number of mass shootings on school campuses and the threat of terrorism, there have been much-needed enhancements and changes made in police equipment, weapons and tactical attire. Many agencies have even received surplus equipment from the military amid growing criticism by some congressmen, especially after the Ferguson riots. Just for clarification, there was not a single piece of military equipment deployed by law enforcement during the riot.

It is not the uniforms officers wear, it is how they act and interact with citizens while in uniform, that matters most. The same holds true for law-enforcement equipment. It is not what equipment departments have, as much as how, when and why they deploy it. The use of armored rescue vehicles and tactical equipment must be done solely for the safety of citizens and officers, and not for the purpose of intimidation.

We have come a long way in our profession, but have so much further to go. We must return to the era of community policing, solving neighborhood problems and reinforcing positive interaction between officers and citizens if we are truly going to maintain the trust, confidence and support of our communities.

Jerry Dyer is in his 14th year as the Fresno police chief.

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