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Assessing the Potential for Community Disorder

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The civil disorders which began on May 17, 1980, in Miami, Fla., drew considerable and protracted attention primarily because of the absence of such disorders in this country for almost a decade. The analysis and debate of the causative factors, the law enforcement response, and the aftermath are still alive in the media and academic and professional forums. The important question is, "Has anything been learned from the Miami riots?" The answer is obviously, "Yes," and this article attempts to treat the development of a management strategy which was learned from one analysis of the situation.
In August 1980, a report prepared by the Enforcement Division, Office of Criminal Justice Programs, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Department of Justice (hereinafter referred to as the Justice Department Report) was issued. It contained an analysis of the conditions in Miami leading up to the disorder, an overview of the disorder, and some very specific and cogent recommendations for disorder planning and management. In my opinion, it was one of the best law enforcement-related reports ever published.

My interest focused upon the disorder control planning and management chapters. As a result, a committee consisting of approximately 20 high-ranking Chicago Police Department officials was formed. Their collective experience ranged from disorder management, planning, communications, and community relations to conducting investigations of excessive force allegations. They were given the initial task of reviewing the Justice Department Report and determining unanimous agreement in three areas:

1. The development of a contemporary disorder control plan.
2. Training for disorder prevention and control.
3. The establishment of a community assessment center.

The Disorder Control Plan

The Chicago Police Department issued its first formal disorder control plan in 1969. Contained in two thick volumes, it was not only comprehensive and detailed but also complex, cumbersome, and virtually never implemented except during training exercises. The manpower mobilization procedures became archaic because unit strengths were drastically altered over the past decades to be responsive to new demands for manpower allocation. The new plan is simpler and represents, at most, approximately 20 percent of the previous voluminous material. Included in the response plan are two mobilization procedures—one using available on-duty personnel, the other describing the recall of off-duty personnel. Each mobilization plan has two phases to provide for an incremental buildup of police personnel, if necessary.

The response plan includes a treatment of various principles in disturbance control, e.g., the objectives and offensives, economy of force, maneuvers, and the unity of command, and the characteristics of disturbance control operations, such as psychological factors in crowds and mobs, methods used to isolate crowds or mobs, and techniques employed by rioters and disturbance leaders, to name just a few. The plan also gives considerable attention to staffing and command actions, information handling and effective communications, command post and assembly area activities, dispersal operations, disturbance control formation, methods necessary to counter aerosol weapons, and most importantly, posterior debriefing procedures and reporting. The new plan deals with specific problems common to most civil disorders, while maintaining sufficient flexibility to permit command personnel to adjust control operations contingent upon the nature and scope of the disturbance.

Training

Training to familiarize personnel with the concepts and maneuvers contained in the emergency response plan is the logical sequel to plan development. The Chicago Police Department’s in-service training program in this area has been established as a 3-day block of instruction. Courses designed for the purpose of familiarization with the response plan include hostage/barricade situations, weapons operations, operation of protective equipment such as gas masks, and practice involving the development of piston and company responses, expanded formations, and new concepts in crowd control techniques.

The in-service training program is undoubtedly the core of virtually every other similar training program designed for disorder control. But in the Chicago Police Department program, there is a substantial amount of time devoted to subject areas designed for the purposes of disorder prevention.

Regardless of the nature or number of identifiable causative factors leading to a civil disorder, the catalyst, all too often, is some police action involving the use of force, especially deadly force, directed at one or more members of a minority group. Not every such police action precipitates a civil disorder, but an inordinate number of civil disorders are ignited by some isolated police action.

Law enforcement or the police as an institution has little, if any, control over the socioeconomic, educational, unemployment, or demographic characteristics of the community it serves. These characteristics are most probably affected by the political environment generally prevailing in a given community at any time. Yet, the police must operate in that political environment, facing daily tasks complicated in many instances by negative considerations such as employment, recession, inflation, etc.

Police do have an inherent responsibility in public service. The historical duties of saving lives, protecting property, and enforcing laws still exist, but the foremost and primary mandate of the police is to protect the rights of all persons. Included in this mandate is that the police themselves do not infringe upon the rights of citizens. The public’s perception, real or imagined, of persistent and patterned abusive practices brings the social woodpile very near its kindling temperature. Then, it takes only an isolated incident of some notoriety involving at least the perceived abuse of authority to ignite the situation, or as experience has taught us, actually ignite blocks and blocks of urban areas.

Because the perceived conduct of police is so important as a factor leading to civil disorder, the Chicago Police Department’s in-service training program places significant emphasis on police behavior. Special attention is given to state statutes and department policy delineating guidelines regarding the use of deadly force and the use of nondeadly force. Also included in the “use of force” emphasis are classroom and range participation sessions involving the “shoot/don’t shoot” concepts, review of department procedures, and actual application during exercises.
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Community Assessment

Law Enforcement

The overabundance of litigation

community tension exists.

- disturbances calling involved con-

Community Assessment

The abundance of litigation filed in the past decade challenging police intelligence activities has result-

- disturbance calls involving con-

business. Each unit having primary respon-

Plans are indispensable. But prevention is only accomplished

... to foster an understanding that we need each other...