Lessons for Ferguson from Cincinnati's 2001 Riots

Before the Cincinnati riots, the police were insular and authoritarian. Today they are proactive, transparent.

By Peter Bronson
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Cincinnati

On a balmy Saturday night in April 2001, an unarmed 19-year-old black man, Timothy Thomas, was shot and killed by a white Cincinnati police officer, Stephen Roach. Two days later, hundreds of protesters mobbed City Hall and the city was overrun by rioters for four days—stores were looted and set on fire, shots were fired at police, innocent citizens were attacked.

Watching the news from Ferguson, Mo., brings back the smell of smoke and acrid tang of fear. It took years for Cincinnati to recover. Afraid of assaults and belligerent protesters, suburbanites shunned downtown. Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg and conventions canceled visits to Cincinnati to honor a boycott initiated by the Black United Front. The riots cost at least $35 million in property damage, lawsuits and boycott losses. The city finally turned the corner when the NAACP held its national convention here in 2008.

In time, Cincinnati's leaders, black and white, learned some valuable lessons about race relations. Here are five that Ferguson, and other U.S. cities that may be one gunshot away from rioting, could benefit from:

• *Tell the public everything immediately*. Cincinnati police offered no explanation of the shooting for two-and-a-half days. Not surprisingly, they were perceived as hiding something. As politicians, protesters and the press pushed the cops to back off, crime exploded. Within three months shootings increased 300%. By 2005 annual homicides had doubled, with more than 300 victims of black-on-black killings between 2001 and 2005.

The shooting of Timothy Thomas was a tragic mistake by a 27-year-old cop startled during a foot pursuit in a dark alley. It later came out that Officer Roach's first words after the shooting were: "It just went off. My gun just went off." He was eventually acquitted of negligent homicide.

But the "murder" narrative became impossible to dissolve with facts. "One of our biggest mistakes was zero communication," Police Chief Tom Streicher said after the riots. "That allowed the city to boil." Thirteen years later Ferguson made the same mistake.
• *Set the record straight.* Many in the press labeled Cincinnati's riots as a "rebellion" or "uprising" against injustice—even as white motorists were pulled from their cars and beaten bloody. News outlets repeated claims that 15 black men had been killed in police custody in the five years before the riots. But nearly all were shot by police in self defense. Some had assaulted officers with knives, axes and guns. The authorities in Cincinnati didn't do enough to set the record straight.

• *Don't crucify the cops.* During the riots, Cincinnati's finest worked around the clock, risked their lives and showed heroic restraint. They were shot at but never responded with lethal force. Beanbag shotguns, cops on horseback and a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. restored order without fatalities. Ferguson's midnight curfew was useless.

• *The federal government can slow the healing.* After the Cincinnati riots, the Justice Department tried to bully cops into admitting civil-rights violations, but it failed. "They were out to hang the cops," said local Fraternal Order of Police President Keith Fangman in 2004. A Justice Department investigation dragged on for five years, yet found no grounds for federal prosecution of Officer Roach for what it determined was a "fast moving, inherently dangerous situation in a dark alley."

Meanwhile, Cincinnati went to work repairing race relations. After a year of meetings supervised by a federal judge, representatives of the city, the police department, the ACLU, the Black United Front and the police union imposed the Collaborative Agreement for police reforms. They included less aggressive pursuit guidelines, a citizen complaint board and community-oriented policing.

It was resented by many cops. But Assistant Chief of Police Paul Humphries, who worked the riots in body armor, said recently, "Some had to be drug along with their heels dug in the sand, but we made a lot of changes and we're better for it."

One of the most effective changes was deployment of Tasers that almost eliminated shootings by police. Another was the 2005 election of a black mayor, Mark Mallory, who backed the police. He hired Cincinnati's first black police chief in 2011, James Craig (now chief of police in Detroit), who rushed to volatile crime scenes to calm the city.

Before the riots there was simmering anger at police in the black community. The police were insular and authoritarian. Today they are proactive, transparent, a model of community-oriented policing.

• *Repudiate race-baiters.* Many agitators came to Cincinnati to loot and riot. The ones in suits were no better. As in Ferguson today, they exploited the crisis for power, press and profit.

Ken Lawson, the black attorney who represented the family of Timothy Thomas, was known as the "Law Dog," the most loved and hated lawyer in town. Before the riots, he said the only "conceivable reason" the police were slow to explain the shooting was "they are trying to cover up the murder."
Lawson served two years in prison on drug charges in 2009 and now teaches law at the University of Hawaii. He has courageously changed his mind about the police shootings.

In a recent interview he told me: "I was wrong for the positions I took with the police and race in Cincinnati. Those cases of police killing black men were accidental. If I say, 'You shot him because he's black,' I'm saying it was racism. But more likely it was fear. The cop wants to come home safe tonight."

Mr. Lawson sees accusations of racism in shootings like the one in Ferguson as "a distraction from the truth." He adds that "by refusing to accept responsibility for our own conduct, by refusing to forgive others for their wrongs, the community stays resentful. Just as the black community must get honest so must the police. That's what Ferguson can take from Cincinnati."

Maybe someday the race hustlers in Ferguson will be as honest. Maybe someday we all will learn from our mistakes.

Mr. Bronson, a contributing editor of Cincy Magazine and a former columnist and editorial page editor of the Cincinnati Enquirer, is the author of "Behind the Lines: The Untold Stories of the Cincinnati Riots" (Chilidog Press, 2006).