

EAST PALO ALTO POLICE DEPARTMENT



POLICE & RACE RELATIONS "THE NEW DIALOGUE"

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CHIEF RONALD L. DAVIS

The controversy surrounding the recent arrest of Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates by the Cambridge Police Department underscores the complex, emotional, and challenging nature of police and race relations.

When evaluating an incident of this nature we must avoid the tendency to fall into one of two divergent views: 1) simply categorize all officers as being racists if they stop a person of color, or 2) ignore our country's troubling history of police abuse in communities of color and label minorities as being overly sensitive if they deem certain police actions as unreasonable. Both perspectives are dangerous oversimplifications of the issue that can only lead to further mistrust of the police and greater racial divide in our communities.

The Gates' incident revealed the divide that remains with regards to race relations despite the significant advances made over the past 30 years and the election of President Obama. In many ways, this incident removed the false sense of racial harmony that followed the historic election. Most Americans viewed the election of a black President as significant progress in race relations; however, defining what this progress represents is where the views differ.

For many non-minorities, the election signaled the end to the lingering effects of slavery, segregation and our troubled history with regards to police and race relations in this country. In other words, if we have a black president why do minorities still view the Gates' arrest (and other similar issues) through a race-based lens?

For many minorities, however, the election represented a different progress – it increased their entitlement to the American dream, lowered their level of tolerance with regards to racial discrimination, and increased their outrage with police abuse of people of color. In other words, if we have a black president why am I still being stopped and abused by the police?

For some, these differing views were masked by the adulation of the election until the Gates' incident sent them on a collision course and sparked an old debate centered on the question of who's right, who's wrong.

To truly improve police and race relations we must end the old debate and engage in a "new dialogue" that transcends that question. By its nature, the answer to who's right suggests that someone must be wrong. Thus, the debate is limited to legality and fails to address the issue of legitimacy for which there is a distinct difference. Legality simply requires the police action to comply with existing law. Legitimacy, however, requires that action meet a higher standard and achieve public approval.

Sir Robert Peel, founder of the first modern-day police force in 1829 states: "The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions." This is not to suggest that the police condone illegal behavior. Nor does it suggest that policing strategies be based on public opinion. Sir Robert Peel also stated, "Police seek and preserve public favour not by catering to public opinion but by constantly demonstrating absolute impartial service to the law."

Peel's comments suggest that, in a democracy, the means of crime control are as important as the end. If the means (the how) are disparate and result in inequities, whether intentional or not, the police will lose their legitimacy despite the legality of the actions or the level of success achieved. In other words, achieving crime reduction provides little solace to communities; especially those of color, that feel more victimized by the means used to achieve the reductions than the actual crimes.

Police officers often struggle with this concept; not because they are insensitive to their communities. To the contrary, most officers want to serve their communities and make them safe. That is why they chose the profession. Officers struggle because the concept of legitimacy appears to defy logic: Why would a community that is adversely affected by crime and violence view legal police actions that successfully reduce crime and violence negatively?

The answer is simple – history. Our history of negative police and race relations has created generational mistrust of the police; especially in communities of color. Stories of police abuse are handed down generation to generation, validated by personal experiences and high-profile incidents such as the recent police shooting of an unarmed black man, Oscar Grant, caught on videotape.

To remove this mistrust, the police must understand this history, its' impact on minority communities, and factor the concept of legitimacy into the way service is provided. Using this framework allows the police and the community to engage in a new dialogue about race relations and ask a different question: How do we enforce the law impartially while achieving legitimacy? The answer to this question not only addresses police and race relations; it is the basis for “advanced” community policing and effective crime-fighting strategies.

History has proven that the police can have a powerful impact on race relations. If police actions can spark race riots and place entire communities in racial turmoil; then it stands to reason that the police can have an equally positive affect as well. This view is often met with skepticism and resistance. Recently, Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton stated that the police can and must play a lead role in improving race relations in America. Bratton's edict was viewed by many as overly ambitious and unrealistic. How can the police address issues that extend beyond them? Should the police get involved or maintain neutrality?

I agree with Chief Bratton. Not only can the police positively impact race relations, they must if we are to advance community policing and further reduce crime and violence in our communities. The real question is: How? I believe the first step is a new dialogue that seeks new solutions and shapes a new vision of race relations in America. This new dialogue is one that does not require cultural assimilation; rather, it embraces differing cultures and identifies shared goals for the betterment of our communities. Achieving this vision requires risk-taking and courageous leadership by both the police and the community.

The challenge going forward is to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Albert Einstein defined insanity as, “...doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results.” To view the Gates' incident (or other similar incident) through the prism of the past meets this definition. If, on the other hand, we use the Gates' incident to engage in a new dialogue, we are likely to advance police and race relations further than we have in the past 30 years. Then, we will better understand our differing perspectives, achieve mutual trust and respect, and avoid the temptation to discard those views we oppose. The partnerships formed from such a dialogue will ultimately strengthen our community policing and crime-reduction efforts.

Next Steps

In October, the Department will launch the “Cultural Competence Training Series” for police personnel which will be incorporated into the Department's quarterly training sessions. Staff will receive training on the varying cultures in our community and engage in meaningful dialogue with leaders from these cultures. The first session in October will be led by Mayor Ruben Abrica.

The New Dialogue

The Mayor will host a panel of Latino community leaders including representatives from Community Legal Services and the Mexican Consulate to discuss Latino culture and specific issues facing this segment of our community. The second session will be held in December and will focus on the African American community. The third session will focus on the Pacific Islander community. More details about the future sessions will be announced at a later date.

In December, I will convene a “Chief’s Advisory Panel” comprised of diverse community members, police personnel, academics, and professionals, to engage in the new dialogue and develop recommendations to improve police and race relations. This group will also be charged with reviewing and evaluating the traffic-stop data collected by the East Palo Alto Police Department over the past year to identify if the department’s operational strategies result in disparate enforcement actions.

Community Forums

The Police Department will host a series of community forums to engage in a broader dialogue about police and race relations and our overall community policing efforts. The first forum will take place October 24, 2009, through a Youth Summit hosted by the Police Chaplains and Police Explorers in partnership with the youth and numerous community and faith-based organizations.

I will host a “Chat with the Chief” in November to discuss the concept of “Advanced Community Policing” and seek input from the community to develop the East Palo Alto Police Department’s 2010 Goals and Objectives.

Conclusion

Taking on this challenge will not be easy. Our efforts will be met with skepticism on many fronts. Some will even question the need to open this “Pandora’s Box” in light of the successes achieved in our community policing and crime reduction efforts. However, if we fail to use our past successes to advance our community policing efforts and lay the foundation for the future, the successes achieved will decrease as crime and violence rates increase.

It is paramount that we meet the challenge head on and take the risks that we face to further improve police and community relations. We must begin to remove the generational mistrust of the police and establish stronger and more strategic partnerships to fight crime at its root. This is what advanced community policing is all about. Now is the time to act!

I have complete confidence in the ability of the men and women of the East Palo Alto Police Department to lead this effort. After all, it is an effort consistent with the police department’s own Vision, which states: “The East Palo Alto Police Department will be nationally accredited and recognized as an industry leader that is committed and responsive to the needs of our community.”

Please join us in this worthy effort.

Sincerely,

Ronald L. Davis
Chief of Police



MISSION

IT IS THE MISSION OF THE EAST PALO ALTO POLICE DEPARTMENT TO WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE COMMUNITY TO REDUCE CRIME AND VIOLENCE AND PROVIDE QUALITY LAW ENFORCEMENT SERVICES.

VISION

THE EAST PALO ALTO POLICE DEPARTMENT WILL BE NATIONALLY ACCREDITED AND RECOGNIZED AS AN INDUSTRY LEADER THAT IS COMMITTED AND RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITY.

VALUES

- **SERVICE**
- **TEAMWORK**
- **RESPECT**
- **INTEGRITY**
- **VISION**
- **EXCELLENCE**

“STRIVE FOR PERFECTION IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE EXCELLENCE”