

# Racism, brutality claims plague Philly police

By Larry Miller

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PHILADELPHIA (NNPA) — Police officers risk their lives every day, hunting down dangerous criminals and engaging in physical confrontations where force must sometimes be used to subdue violent felons.

But sometimes officers exceed the protocols of what is acceptable in law enforcement.

When that happens, allegations of excessive force and police brutality, which has long been an issue in Philadelphia, comes to light.

For example, on a hot August day in 1964, rumors that police assaulted a Black woman touched off the Columbia Avenue race riots in North Philadelphia.

In two days of violence, more than 300 people were injured, 774 were arrested and 225 stores were damaged or destroyed.

It's been decades since an incident of police misconduct sparked a violent response from the Black community, but the issue of police brutality continues to remain in the public eye.

This is even more so in an era where surveillance cameras are common fixtures, video recorders are small enough to fit inside a pocket, and cell phone cameras can record an incident of police misconduct that can make international headlines, which is what happened when reporters in a local Fox 29 news helicopter hovered over a group of officers punching, kicking and using their batons on three shooting suspects.

Last week, Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey fired four of those officers and sternly disciplined four others, including demoting a sergeant, for their role in the May 5 incident.

Then, a group of supporters for the suspects held a protest outside the district attorney's office.

District Attorney Lynne Abraham, who cannot comment on an active investigation, has said that the case will probably move on to the grand jury for further action.

"I think there's been a sense of mistrust in the Black community against police — not just in Philadelphia but in urban environments across the country," said Damon K. Roberts, attorney and former candidate for City Council. "I think Ramsey's actions have brought out the necessity of

making the police department a place where people can have confidence. What happens when news cameras aren't on the scene? People need to know they're going to get the same level of action and that the police will conduct themselves professionally whether the cameras are there or not."

## Black on Black

But the other side of this issue is the high level of violent crime in the Black community, where repeat offenders murder each other, sometimes shoot it out with police and prey on law-abiding working residents.

Last year, there were 391 murders in Philadelphia and, according to Police Department statistics, 309 of those victims were African-Americans, killed by other Blacks.

At last count, there have been 117 murders in Philadelphia and, again, most of the victims are Black.

Police officers Stephen Liczbinski, Charles Cassidy and Gary Skerski were all killed by Black males with histories of past encounters with law enforcement; Solomon Montgomery, John Lewis and Howard Cain.

On Oct. 27, 2007, Officer Sandra Van Hinkle was wounded outside the Koko Bongo nightclub during an altercation in which at least three individuals fired guns at police.

Officers returned fire, killing Lamarr Bemby, 21, of the 5400 block of Race Street.

Bemby had a record of previous arrests and was on probation for carrying a firearm without a license, according to court documents.

Last week, another repeat offender, Antonio Coulter, pleaded guilty to having shot and wounded Officer Richard Decoatsworth on Sept. 24, 2007, during a routine traffic stop. Court documents show Coulter has a history of past arrests.

Community leaders and other experts say that at the heart of the issue is public trust and confidence in the police force, particularly in African-American communities where crime and violence are rife.

Officers often remark how critical information on the whereabouts of wanted fugitives and descriptions of murder suspects isn't always forthcoming, indicating that trust is lacking.

"The seeds of the mistrust were sown decades ago," said J. Whyatt Mondesire,

state president of the NAACP.

"And typically in Philadelphia, the response of the police department and the district attorney's office was slow regarding incidents of excessive force. There was miniscule change. The older generation, of course, recalls the days when Frank Rizzo was police commissioner and the department was known to be heavy-handed. But that was then, and a lot of those people are gone. Now, of course, we're in an age where surveillance cameras and even a cell phone can capture images of officers stepping over the line.

The question is: What can happen when there isn't a camera watching? Is there a lack of confidence in the police department? Yes, but I think that improved when Commissioner Ramsey

moved on this the other day. There's a lot more that will happen on this case though. The FOP will file its appeals and the grand jury will investigate, there's a lot that can happen but I think it has set a precedent."

## Police abuse

According to a Department of Justice report, police abuse erodes public confidence but also obscures the good work of law enforcement and those daily incidents when police officers make arrests without violence.

"When police go beyond reasonable force to use excessive force during an arrest or in precipitous response, as during the decades of protest demonstrations involving labor, civil rights or other controversial issues, citizens become victims of police and the public's confidence in a

police force can plummet," said the report.

"Known abuses of force rightfully receive extensive attention from the public, politicians, media and, in some cases, civil and even criminal courts. While condemning the incidents of excessive force, law enforcement officials note that not enough attention and credit is given to the police when they successfully resolve situations without any use of force or with only minimal force."

Nation of Islam Min. Rodney Muhammad said that because Philadelphia has had such a long history of abuses within the police department that federal oversight should be brought in.

"What happened on May 5 is just another link in a long chain of events going back for decades," Muhammad said.

"We have to go after the deep-rooted culture of violence. We have a flawed system of oversight to address misconduct within the Philadelphia Police Department. Too many officers accused of inappropriate behavior have been allowed to return to their jobs. We need for the federal government to step in or even for congressional hearings to take place."

There have been several key cases of alleged police abuse in Philadelphia.

In 1977 officers allegedly beat William Cradle after stopping him for a traffic violation in Society Hill.

More than 20 people witnessed the incident and a federal probe of excessive force in Philadelphia was initiated in response.

The three officers were acquitted of charges that they

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## Your Horoscope Says... May 29-June 4

### ARIES

Your spiritual vibes will give you insight on a situation that's been on your mind. Share your thoughts with someone close to you. Spend time with friends and family that will provide support and guidance when you make an important decision.

Soul Affirmation: I enjoy looking at the road of life sweeping just in front of me.

Lucky Numbers: 20, 40, 41

### TAURUS

Your careless ways with money are going to be apparent this week. Financial mistakes you've made in the past will be especially painful. Don't conceal the pain from yourself. It is a warning that you should take steps to prevent future financial crisis.

Soul Affirmation: I let my friendships guide my way.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 27, 31

### GEMINI

Take advantage of the great weather and spend time outdoors enjoying and relaxing with Mother Nature. Learn a new sport, and spend time with family and friends. Don't take travel matters into your own hands. Seek a professional who will be able to plan a wonderful vacation for you without breaking your bank. Cook up some goodies for your loved ones.

Soul Affirmation: I change who I am by changing where I am going.

Lucky Numbers: 4, 53, 54

### CANCER

Stay positive, don't let negative people get inside your head. You know that things will work out well. Ease rapidly away from anyone who is a naysayer. During the week, things may seem hard at times, but soon life will be filled with fun. Enjoy!

Soul Affirmation: The slowness of my week gives me time to refresh my

energy.

Lucky Numbers: 19, 30, 45

### LEO

The bond that you established with your spiritual side works well in your relationship with a special person. Speak of the reality of the intangible qualities of life. Your lover will understand. Keep attention on the financial matters you've been dealing with.

Soul Affirmation: I obey the rules this week and avoid hassles.

Lucky Numbers: 18, 29, 30

### VIRGO

The link that you've established with your spiritual self will be strengthened by the people who come into your life this week. This week is a week for seriousness about a relationship. Discuss your deepest thoughts with others. They'll understand and thank you for sharing intimate parts of yourself.

Soul Affirmation: Faith keeps me calm in the storms of life.

Lucky Numbers: 14, 29, 43

### LIBRA

You've done some of your own love homework. Hopefully, you've had an opportunity to learn a new way of seeing the world, and, in that way, you've found a way of loving that is more natural for you. The combination of sexiness and joyful focus can create you a wonderful love experience.

Soul Affirmation: I get joy from giving good things.

Lucky Numbers: 14, 23, 45

### SCORPIO

Share in the glory of your friend who has been recognized for outstanding work. Plan a small get-together to celebrate the occasion. Your time will come, and you will be placed on the pedestal. Your intimacy radar is sensitive. Watch out for a new romance that might come along. Expect the unexpected! You will be pleasantly surprised!

Soul Affirmation: Love is easier than

breathing.

Lucky Numbers: 16, 30, 50

### SAGITTARIUS

You've done a lot of things in life that no one has agreed with at the beginning. Finding agreement this week will be difficult, but it should not deter you from moving forward. Feeling sorry for your loneliness will discolor what you are doing. Be happy that you are alone.

Soul Affirmation: I get joy from giving good things.

Lucky Numbers: 2, 10, 31

### CAPRICORN

Eternal optimist, eternity is now. Get in touch with your hopefulness and be a beacon to others. Try not to be taken in by promises made by others or promises you've made to yourself. Concerning your own affairs, avoid contemplating lofty subjects and seeking long-ranged solutions.

Soul Affirmation: Time is the greatest peacemaker of them all.

Lucky Numbers: 14, 28, 39

### AQUARIUS

Some say optimism is fantasy. Suppose the good thing you're optimistic about never comes. This week you'll know that the joy of anticipating it is joy enough. Just the certainty of coming goodness is present goodness. The joy of tomorrow is available this week.

Soul Affirmation: This week is the week the Lord has made. I rejoice in it.

Lucky Numbers: 22, 36, 38

### PISCES

You might be looking into the buying or selling of a piece of property, and this week seems to be a favorable week for this type of negotiation. Be careful with the intricacies of the matter. Pay attention to details or it could cost you a great deal later.

Soul Affirmation: I care deeply about the feelings of others.

Lucky Numbers: 11, 21, 35