

Twin reviews of Utah police shootings examine societal, officer training issues

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OGDEN — As a young Ogden beat cop in 1975, Scott Carver lived in a different world. “When there was a fight or a disturbance and the police showed up, everyone ran,” Carver said. “Very seldom were you in a fight yourself.”

Some people were drunk. There was some marijuana but no cocaine or heroin, he said.

“Meth wasn’t even a thing,” said Carver, who was with the Ogden Police Department from ‘75 to 1980.

No police shootings in Ogden that whole time, he said.

But four decades later, the 66-year-old Carver is looking into the three fatal Ogden police shootings that happened in a three-week period late last year.

It is part of a review Carver is heading up for the Utah Attorney General's Office. Officials are studying the wave of fatal police shootings statewide in 2018 — an unprecedented 19, according to the Salt Lake Tribune.

Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah also has been looking into the surge, in another probe that may, along with the AG's effort, put pressure on state policymakers to address police shootings.

In 2018, Carver worked for the Unified Police Department in Salt Lake County.

"There were three shootings in five days," he said.

"Then, the Ogden shootings. That made all of us sit up and take notice."

Once he became law enforcement training director for the attorney general, Carver approached AG Sean Reyes with the idea of studying the matter. Carver since has been collecting data from city and county law enforcement agencies statewide. He said the study will not reopen investigations into police conduct, but rather will focus on officer training issues and delve into possible societal triggers for fatal confrontations.

"Is this a trend or an anomaly," he said. "Second, what can we learn from a training perspective and make adjustments that will have a positive impact on those numbers?"

Carver plans to work with the Utah Department of Corrections to dig into the criminal histories of those who died in the police shootings.

"We want to know what role does suicide by cop play, mental health, drug issues, in all these shootings."

Today, unlike the 1970s, "the aggression, the lack of respect for authority, it generally pervades our society," Carver said.

This significantly includes people not obeying police commands.

"Everybody looks at the police officer — 'why did the police officer shoot?'"

But sometimes absent from the discussion is noncompliance by suspects, he said.

"The answer, and what I call the cure, if the individual had just done what the officer asked ... for whatever reason they want us to use extreme recourse. They should have backed off.

"In all of the cases I've seen so far, in every case, had the individual just done what was asked of them there would not have been a shooting."

THE JAIL DEATHS EXAMPLE

Jason Stevenson, of the ACLU, questioned reliance on society's ills as an explanation for the rise in police shootings.

"I think we need to do more research," Stevenson said. "What are the underlying factors? What separated fatal and non-fatal incidents?"

He added, “We can’t think anecdotally and we can’t think that those macro trends are affecting these incidents specifically, because they might not be.

“There could be other factors that we could ignore if we could just blame it on trends in society.”

Stevenson likened the debate over Utah’s police shootings to what developed after 27 people died in the state’s county jails in 2016 — the most ever documented in Utah.

Parallels include spotty documentation at the state level. County sheriff’s offices did not report jail deaths to the state until the Legislature mandated it in 2018. County attorneys handle police shooting investigations, but no one in government was tracking the incidents until Carver’s review.

“The Legislature intervened and put some guardrails on this issue of the jails, steering it in the right direction to make things better,” Stevenson said.

Now, with the 2018 police shootings, “We can’t ignore a threefold increase and pretend to understand it and just ignore it,” he said.

Carver said some law enforcement officials have expressed concern to him about the attorney general’s review.

He met with the police chiefs association.

“They have some questions,” he said. “The issue is very important to them, that it’s handled right. In general they’re concerned the information is handled by the right people with the right intentions.”

In a March 19 letter to law enforcement agencies, Reyes assured officials the probe “will not be a review of the justifications of the shootings.”

“I believe this warrants a cooperative in-depth study to see what actions we might take to reduce the number of shootings, increase the safety of our officers, and maintain a high level of public trust,” the attorney general wrote.

Reyes’ letter also inquired, “Is there an ‘anti-law enforcement sentiment’ factor?”

‘WE TRY VERY HARD TO TRAIN THAT OUT’

Ogden Police Chief Randy Watt said he has no problem with the AG’s study.

“They are just trying to figure out why the sudden increase in deadly force, and police being forced to utilize deadly force,” Watt said. “Can they identify causal factors and conditions which might be addressed? They’re not looking to find fault with police.”

He said he also welcomes inquiries like the ACLU’s.

“I don’t mind the scrutiny at all,” Watt said. “I don’t mind having different points of view. Let’s look at finding the best information at hand.”

Ogden officers last fall shot to death Anthony Borden-Cortez, Christopher William Parrish and Richard Galvan.

Investigators said Parrish charged officers with a rock, Borden-Cortez pointed an air rifle at pursuing officers and Galvan engaged in a shootout with police by Christmas Village.

The Weber County Attorney's Office ruled the shootings were justified, and Watt said his officers properly followed policies and procedures.

"We watch carefully the incidents we have and we are constantly evaluating those to see if there are other factors and procedures which might mitigate them," Watt said.

"We take the application of deadly force very seriously."

Watt said no policies have been changed, but the department has increased training, including bringing in instructors from the [Force Science Institute](#).

"We have greatly intermixed our training according to the most current thought and studies of how to train police officers to exercise the greatest possible judgment in highly stressful situations," Watt said.

"The primary cause of bad judgment in a deadly force situation is a lack of confidence on the part of the officer in terms of the ability to handle situations of physiological and psychological stress.

"We try very hard to train that out."