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Building the perfect cop in Sacramento

President Barack Obama's community-policing strategy comes to Sacramento. Can it restore public trust in a profession shaken by national events?

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Francine Tournour was riding shotgun with one of law enforcement's busiest solo acts. Young, hungry and tasked to the Valley Hi-Meadowview neighborhood, this Sacramento city patrolman had become one of the department's best producers, racking up busts and contraband each nighttime shift. Tournour wanted to see, with her own eyes, how this "Super Cop" did it.

Being no ordinary civilian, this was no ordinary ride-along. A former officer in Oakland and Sacramento, the tall and trim Tournour segued from being police to monitoring them. She runs this city's Office of Public Safety and Accountability, which tracks civilian complaints against the police and fire departments. It's essentially a one-woman gig, with Tournour racing to shooting scenes, bending the ear of internal-affairs investigators and, on nights like these, shadowing officers as they interpret what it means to protect and serve.

That mission has rarely occasioned more scrutiny.

The nationwide killings of unarmed civilians and rough treatment of protesters have red-flagged questions about police competence, oversight and militarization. "There is a problem within the police organization," admits Darryl Forte, the first black police chief of Kansas City, Mo., and an adopter of some of the reforms that Sacramento is considering.

This stormy national debate has gusted law enforcement's identity crisis straight to the 916. Captivated by events in Ferguson, and following the lead of President Barack Obama, who created a task force on 21st-century policing, Mayor Kevin Johnson has called for a kinder, more diverse force. But his pitch is already in peril. Police Chief Sam Somers Jr. recently brought his ideas to improve community relations before the city council—and departed with claw marks in his dress blues, left by vocal residents who demanded fewer cops, not more.

For minority communities that relate to police as oppressors and occupiers, this is hardly new business. It's just the latest flashpoint in a weary culture war.

"We are in the middle of one of those defining national moments," says David Kennedy, director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "We are used to saying these are bad people in bad places and that is not right. We are blaming the community for our external failures."

Back on patrol, Tournour watches Super Cop do what every cop in every U.S. city does: hunt for bad guys. When he spots a car displaying tinted windows or cranking loud beats, he spins around, hugs the vehicle's bumper and waits. "They call it 'pretext stops.' Basically kicking the hornet's nest. See what happens," Tournour explains.

In her estimation, about one out of every five drivers rabbited, prompting a short pursuit and a quality arrest with guns or dope. But in most cases, freaked drivers crawled to their destinations and cautiously parked. In these instances, Super Cop prowled on without explanation.

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"Can you imagine if that happened to you three or four times, in your own neighborhood? What would you think of the police?" Tournour says. "But in this cop's mind, this is good police work. He's getting guns and drugs off the street."

So what does it mean to wear the badge in 2015? And what *should* it mean? SN&R is taking this exploration to the streets. Suit up, rookies. Our shift starts now.

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Real oversight lacking

It might not be readily obvious why faith in society's protectors is crumbling.

After all, there were 29 homicides in the city of Sacramento last year, representing a 41-year low, according to Somers. Taken together with what are known as other Part 1 offenses—anything violent, as well as burglaries, vehicle thefts and larceny—reported crime dropped by almost 15 percent between 2013 and 2014.

But there are caveats, and herein lies the tension between police and the policed.

First, all these numbers are self-reported by law enforcement. And, while it would be difficult to hide a dead body, critics regularly question whether they can trust the figures that agencies feed them, especially when other unknown unknowns—like officer-involved shootings, deaths in custody and use-of-force incidents—aren't tabulated nationally.

Here's something that is known: Complaints against the department dropped to 157 in 2013 after rising by about 5 percent, to 207, the previous year. But Tournour acknowledges that responsiveness to those complaints could have something to do with it.

In 2013, the department's internal-affairs bureau resolved 18.5 percent of the complaints reported to it, according to OPSA, down from 33.8 percent the previous year.

"A lot of complaints are first-time complaints," Tournour notes, suggesting that disgruntled residents quickly get the message that their issues won't be addressed. "There's a perception that the fox is guarding the henhouse."

Kansas City chief Forte understands that perception. "We've always been arrogant, because you know why? Because there's nothing you can do to me," he says of a complaint process that rarely affects an officer's income or job security.

That attitude feeds into the longstanding cynicism that certain neighborhoods have toward the police, and why there's little cooperation when crimes do occur. For instance, only 15 percent of gunshot incidents are reported annually, national estimates suggest, while about 65 percent of the homicides in Sacramento County are solved through an arrest. Only about 24 percent of sexual assaults and 12 percent of property crimes are solved through arrest, with both of those crimes being underreported as is.

What makes or breaks those cases, authorities say, is the willingness of people to talk.

"It's not on the DNA or forensic level," says police Sgt. Doug Morse, a department spokesman. "A good call is solved because someone saw something. What we really need is a

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connected community."

And a community that connects to its police.

Since taking over as Kansas City police chief three years ago, Forte has tried various things to strengthen that bond. The department swapped indiscriminate enforcement sweeps for concentrated patrols where crime is the worst. He's placed acoustic sensors in a 2.5-square-mile grid to detect the gunfire that residents don't report. And he keeps in regular contact with community leaders to listen, he says, not talk.

Last year, Kansas City dropped below 100 homicides for the first time in years.

"We actually wounded and killed unarmed black males since I've been chief," he says. After one such fatality, Forte visited the dead man's father in the hospital. "He said, 'Darryl, I trust you. Because you're the chief, I know it's going to be a fair investigation.' You know what that means? That means a lot."

Here in Sacramento, Somers has already implemented geographic policing, and has proposed the gunfire-detecting ShotSpotter technology as well. He's also called for bias-based training and an upgraded use-of-force simulator that can plunge cadets into a 180-degree virtual reality. He's pilot-testing body cameras and wants patrol officers to spend two hours every week walking their beats and talking to folks, a throwback to the days when people knew—and were more likely to trust—their police officers. "I think we need to go back in time a little bit," Somers told council members last month.

Realizing that there's little faith in the department's in-house oversight, Somers also volunteered the department for a national, three-year UCLA study of its enforcement stops and use of force. "We're very good at measuring crime, but we haven't done so well when it comes to … our community connections," he acknowledged.

Hiring a representative force

Behind the grinding automated gate of a station house on Franklin Boulevard, Morse selects a patrol cruiser from the yard and drops his go-bag in the trunk. North of 30 and roughly 6 feet tall, the recently promoted sergeant isn't thick-necked like some of the younger officers exiting the gym in shorts and flip-flops. A military veteran who followed his big brother's career path, he's been with the department 11 years, handling media requests the last two.

It's no wonder he's itching for street duty.

Morse calls patrol the department's backbone, and it's true: 41 percent of the department's staff is tasked to field services. The investigative division, which is responsible for solving crimes, accounts for 16 percent of personnel.

Taken together, it's a workforce that's gradually rebuilding.

After years of hiring freezes and downsized training academies, a recovering economy has allowed law-enforcement agencies to begin recruiting again. Staffing at the police department has crept up the last three years, with Somers' latest budget proposal recommending another 6.4 percent bump to 723 sworn officers this coming fiscal year. His goal to have two officers per every 1,000 residents by 2035 would mean steady hiring increases for the foreseeable future.

That annual $1.4 million line item drew the most contention last month, with critics accusing Somers of using his community-policing platform to slip in a jobs bill.

"We don't want more money for cops," said Claire White of the National Lawyers Guild and a contingent of police critics that speaks frequently at city council meetings, including last week's. "Please let's not go back down the road of having more cops on the street."

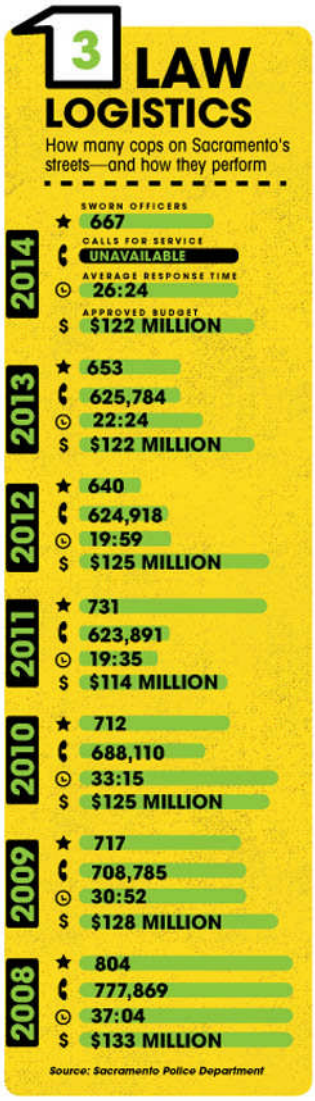
It may be too late for that, especially with construction of a downtown Kings arena and ancillary development expected to substantially increase the city's foot traffic.

The department is already getting younger, which matters because newer officers rack up more complaints and use-of-force incidents than their older counterparts, says Tournour. That's partly because veterans are more experienced and because younger officers patrol the city's rougher sectors.

What's also changed is the agency's demographics, though not in ways one might expect. Back in 1999, the department was 66 percent male and 69 percent white. Fourteen years later, in 2013, the department stood 82 percent male and 76 percent white.

That's right, in "post-racial" Sacramento, which boasts one of the most diverse urban populations, the po-po have only gotten paler and more bro-ish.

Somers has an explanation. "My first comment about diversifying an agency is you have to hire," he told council members on January 27. "Because the one thing we're finding is we're not having problems getting applicants. … It's about who we're signing up."



Tournour says the chief is receptive to feedback on this front. She would like the department to scrap its oral panel, which inadvertently weeds out anyone who doesn't look or think like the typical cop.

Background checks also need to be re-evaluated, say some officers. One county sheriff's deputy told SN&R that some of his academy's most talented graduates didn't get hired because of chintzy infractions from their youth, while less talented cadets scored jobs because of squeaky-clean pasts.

"You don't want that. You want life experience," Tournour says. "You don't want people that think like cops all the time."

Back on patrol, Morse scans the 8-bit-looking monitor for our first adventure. Dispatch accommodates us with a nearby welfare check. The caller is the power of attorney for a trust. His 39-year-old male client threatened to kill himself and others in an email, and may have a history of drug abuse.

A suicide threat with a twist.

One of the worst such calls occurred January 2013, when a frantic mother dialed 911 and asked responders to rescue her suicidal son. When officers finally caught up to the young man near J and 43rd streets, they could only watch as he worked a knife through his throat. Officers zapped him with Tasers, trying to get him to stop, but he was immune. He bled out in front of them.

Tournour says the ghastly scene shook officers to their core.

It's a pain they often carry inside.

"You can't ask for help as a cop," Tournour says of the profession's stubbornly macho culture. "You're supposed to be a pillar."

Dangerous job, lots of discretion

Morse cruises east on U Street, passing the pearl-white pavilion of Vizcaya, where a photographer snaps a violet-haired young woman perched on a bannister. This is a moneyed neighborhood, with bushy trees and manicured lawns dashing emerald color at the brickwork estates and caramel townhouses. Morse parks down the street from the apartments where the caller's client lives, lowering the chances of being spotted and prompting a confrontation or foot pursuit.

As of February 16, police have confronted at least five despondent subjects across the city this year. On the afternoon of February 3, officers safely evacuated the Northview Drive home of an armed, suicidal subject before convincing him to surrender and be taken to a hospital. Authorities grumble that these peaceful resolutions are rarely covered.

Rather, attention is paid when blood is spilled. Of the four officer-involved shootings that occurred inside the city last year, two were suicides by cop, including a March incident in which a 51-year-old man, reportedly armed with a knife, charged officers aboard a light-rail train pleading to be shot. After Tasers proved ineffective, they did.

Handling today's distress call are two veterans, Corporal Pete Diaz and Officer Barbara Deer. They recently attended a seminar on communicating with the mentally ill. Deer found it worthwhile, but wished it provided more tips for de-escalating situations that can turn unpredictable real quick, like the heavily scrutinized police killings last year of psychologically troubled military veterans in Woodland and Lodi. Both fatal encounters were deemed "good shootings."

That collision between returning soldiers and a profession that heavily recruits veterans is a largely unspoken irony.

Law enforcement is the one profession that can't make the mentally ill someone else's problem, Morse explains, even as the recession stripped other community resources. As a result, police have been forced to become the Swiss Army knife of social ills—used in every situation, no matter how crude.

"It's really, really sad," Deer says of returning to patrol and rediscovering the fractured individuals, often homeless and rudderless, wandering through downtown. "We're failing these people. And we [law enforcement] have limited resources to deal with them."

One of the proposals Chief Somers skimmed through was a psychiatric emergency response team made up of both cops and mental-health clinicians. The hybrid squad would respond to psychologically-tinged calls for service.

This is gradually becoming the new normal—a police force that isn't just about cracking skulls and clearing corners, but the careful toil of restoration. Saving people. Not just from each other, but themselves.

It's a nice idea, but remains just that for now.

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Bites Sacramento community ponders

Diaz, Deer and Morse cross the tiled courtyard to a downstairs unit with a glass-fixtured door. Diaz raps loudly with a familiar tune, keeping it light: “Shave and a Haircut, Two Bits.”

The commotion draws a tenant down the stoop, a petite young woman clutching a similarly small Chihuahua. She explains that she last saw her neighbor working on his car around 10:30 a.m.

Deer discreetly asks the question that’s on everyone’s mind. Has the man expressed depressed thoughts? The woman thinks for a moment. “He did just find out he’s going to be a father.”

Sounds like great news, Deer suggests.

Not to the man, the woman replies.

As we leave, Morse and Diaz spy a black Mercedes-Benz SLK 350 parked diagonally in front of the dilapidated building next door. It wasn’t there earlier. Its plates come back registered to the man in question.

Diaz and Morse double back to the main entry as Deer covers the backdoor. After his shouts go unanswered, Diaz tries the knob. It turns without a fuss. The exigent circumstances of the call mean they don’t need a warrant to enter. The two pull their sidearms and cross the threshold.

Diaz enters first, with Morse close behind, placing a palm on his ex-recruiter’s shoulder. Stuffed animals and cardboard boxes litter the floor. The television is on and a cellphone sits plugged into its charger. On a monitor, Morse glimpses a live feed of the street outside. A plum-sized surveillance camera, mounted to the front-facing window, spied us coming. The two officers see bits of chunky powder on a table. Then they see the gun.

As the two search, a man, 6 feet with graying hair, passes out front. He walks swiftly, but makes direct eye contact. His rubbery face creases into a hard smile. He waves. Not unusual—nosy neighbors eyeball scenes like this all the time—but it sticks in Deer’s mind. Later, a photo proves it was, in fact, the guy.

At the open trunk of his cruiser, Diaz confirms the .38-caliber revolver is registered to the subject. He places the pistol in a little briefcase with a bum latch. “This was the first legit clear I did” since returning to patrol, he tells Morse. “I’m all jacked up.”

On a slip of paper, Deer jots a “while you were out” note. It explains the visit’s purpose, states the man’s gun was taken for safekeeping and asks him to call.

“‘And please clean up your meth,’” Morse deadpans.

Behind the wheel, he turns serious. He’s seen how easy it is for mentally troubled individuals to slide into addiction, like frogs slowly boiling to death in gradually warming water. Maybe this will be the reality check the guy needs.

He shifts the cruiser into gear.

End of watch

Fernando Cruz is not a lucky man.

According to the gang-unit officers at the scene, the 37-year-old allegedly smashed a stolen Cherokee Laredo into the side of an occupied sedan, then motored off before their eyes. The damaged Jeep got less than a block down Edison Avenue in the Arcade Village neighborhood before the flashing lights of their unmarked police car pulled it up short. The driver braked abruptly outside of a school and made like he was going to run, but reconsidered.

The radio flutters with word that the driver is in custody. But his female passenger is currently in the wind. As Morse eases his cruiser toward a bank of emergency vehicles and an audience that’s gathered in front of an apartment complex, we spot a middle-aged black woman walking with her back to the scene. Her eyes downcast, she’s got the hood of her blue windbreaker flipped over her head.

Morse wheels into a sinuous turn and gets on the walkie. “Suspect description?” he asks.

A voice responds that the passenger is a Hispanic female. That would seem to rule out our uninterested bystander, but it’s possible to mistake race in the midst of a pursuit. He double-checks. “Clothing?”

Dark jeans, brown jacket. Not her. Morse is satisfied. But by this time, the woman has made us. Before Morse can bend the wheel, she beelines to his window.

“Can I help you?” she asks, the faintest hint of exasperation in her voice. “I saw you stop and look at me.”

Morse comes mostly clean, saying he’s helping clear the scene without mentioning the escaped passenger. It’s a brief exchange that ends with the woman flashing a wide smile as Morse tells her to be careful crossing the street.

It’s more than Super Cop would have done.

As dusk falls, leaving the swirling sirens to shoulder the darkness, Morse rolls around a question from hours ago: How do you build the perfect cop?

“It’s not so much what makes the ideal officer,” he finally decides. “It’s what makes the ideal department.”

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