

## **Police Violence is Not Inevitable: Four Ways a California Police Chief Connected Cops with Communities**

**In the wake of Missouri's grand jury decision, a model for better policing and relationships with the community is needed. Richmond, California is an example other cities can learn from.**

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In the wake of a Missouri grand jury's decision not to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, it can be difficult to imagine a place where law enforcement and a racially diverse population work together productively in the United States.

But it's happening in Richmond, California, a gritty town in the San Francisco Bay Area best known for its massive Chevron refinery and, in previous years, for its high crime rate. While the situation in Richmond isn't perfect, it is an example other cities can learn from.

Today, violent crime in Richmond is down. In 2013, Richmond had 16 murders—the lowest number in 33 years—and far fewer unsolved homicide cases than in previous years.

Police violence, in particular, is way down. Despite making thousands of arrests each year and confiscating one gun or more every day, the Richmond Police Department has averaged less than one officer-involved shooting per year since 2008. On September 6, *The Contra Costa Times* ran a story citing these and other statistics [under the headline “Use of Deadly Force by Police Disappears on Richmond Streets.”](#)

Police Chief Chris Magnus has been widely credited with enacting the reforms that led to these changes. In recognition of Richmond's progress, and Magnus' role in it, the U.S. Department of Justice recently added him to a panel of experts investigating the breakdown of police-community relations in Ferguson, Missouri. That investigation continues, even though the grand jury's decision has been released. Magnus was unable to comment about the status of that inquiry or what recommendations might result. But he did say that Brown's death and the resulting civil unrest have had one positive effect.

“More communities are now taking a closer look at what's going on in their own police departments and whether it meets their needs, including on issues involving race and diversity,” he observes. “A critical look at any institution with as much power and authority invested in it as the police is probably a good thing.”

### **Who's Chris Magnus?**

When Magnus first interviewed for the job of Richmond police chief in 2005, the city was notorious for its violent crime, youth gangs, illegal drugs, and troubled relations between police officers and city residents.

The search committee wanted to hire a new chief of police who could reduce crime by reconnecting the department to the people it served. Those vetting Magnus were impressed with his credentials as just this kind of public safety reformer.

Unfortunately for Magnus, there was the little matter of his previous posting. As police chief of Fargo, North Dakota, he hailed from one of the safest and whitest places in America. From 2004 to 2005, Fargo averaged two homicides per year, encouraging the Hollywood image of it as sleepy, small-town policing in the upper Midwest. Richmond's population is actually slightly smaller than Fargo's, but its people are less wealthy and only 17 percent are white. And then there was the violence: In 2005, 40 murders were recorded in Richmond. In terms of homicides per capita, it was among the most dangerous places in the United States.

City officials in Fargo said that Magnus had been effective during his six years as police chief. Could that success be replicated in an environment with far greater racial diversity and no shortage of social dysfunction?

"I really thought Fargo would be a disqualifier for me because of the demographics of the city," Magnus told *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 2005.

But Richmond's municipal leaders, including Gayle McLaughlin, a Green Party member who has been mayor since January 2007, decided that Magnus was the right man for the job. They hired him in December 2005, when McLaughlin was still a City Council member.

Magnus took one unusual step right away. Although most Richmond police officers live outside the city, he bought a home near downtown. From there, he bicycled to work. The problem was that he could never get away from the challenges of his job. From his home he could hear police sirens late into the night, the occasional shot being fired, and members of his neighborhood association knocking on his door to report crimes.

Since marrying Terrance Cheung, a top assistant to a county supervisor, Magnus has moved to a quieter part of Richmond.

During his nine years as chief, Magnus has implemented a number of policing reforms. We spoke to him about what it took to make the Richmond Police Department into what it is today.

## **1. Rewarding cops for connecting with the community**

Magnus began the process of change by reshuffling the department's command structure and promoting like-minded senior officers. He also ended the practice of putting "street teams" into high crime neighborhoods, where they would "roust anybody who's out walking around, with the idea that they might have a warrant outstanding or be holding drugs," Magnus says.

In his view, that approach only serves to "alienate the whole population that lives in those neighborhoods," most of whom are "good people not engaged in crime."

Patrol officers were given more regular beats and directed to spend more time on foot, rather than in squad cars. Their job evaluations and career advancement are now tied to their success in community engagement and individual relationship-building.

"We assign people for longer periods of time to specific geographic areas with the expectation that they get to know and become known by residents," Magnus explains. "They are in and out of businesses, nonprofits, churches, a wide variety of community organizations, and they come to be seen as a partner in crime reduction."

## 2. Hiring for diversity

As chief, Magnus has made it a top priority to hire and promote more women, Asians, Latinos, and African Americans.

“When you have a department that doesn’t look anything like the community it serves, you’re asking for trouble, no matter how dedicated and professional your employees are,” he says. “So an ongoing mission for us here is to hire the highest-quality people that represent that diversity of the community, across the board. I don’t even just mean from a racial, ethnic, or gender standpoint. I mean in terms of life experiences, being connected to neighborhoods, growing up either in Richmond or cities like Richmond.”

Unfortunately, the department has changed record-keeping systems since Magnus took office, which makes it difficult to compare diversity figures directly. But Magnus says the numbers are substantially improved. Today, about 60 percent of Richmond’s 182 active police officers are black, Latino, Asian, or Native American; about 40 percent are white, according to Deputy Chief Allwyn Brown. There are now 26 female officers on the force, including highly visible leaders like Captain Bisa French and Lieutenant Lori Curran.

## 3. Partnering with activists and city groups

Under Magnus, the Richmond Police Department worked closely with the new city hall-based Office of Neighborhood Safety, which deploys a network of street-smart youth mentors to identify teenagers most at risk of joining gangs or engaging in gun violence. The office has enrolled scores of young men and women in a “Peacemaker Fellowship” designed to provide job training, counseling, and financial support to young people who agree to abandon a life of crime.

*Mother Jones* [described the program](#) as “a little like stop-and-frisk, except the profiled subjects are singled out for positive attention and opportunities.”

In a city with frequent marches and demonstrations, the department has also distinguished itself for working with community organizers to minimize tensions during street protests. And activists wary of most other law enforcement agencies have praised the RPD’s handling of large-scale disobedience, like a sit-in in 2013 at the entrance to the Chevron refinery or more recent skirmishing about the transportation of crude oil through the city by train.

Andrés Soto, a native of Richmond and a leading environmental justice campaigner, says the city has come a long way from the days when “there were not a lot of professional standards” in the hiring of new officers. Back then, he says, Richmond employed too many “ex-military, thuggish cops and rednecks” whose behavior led to costly police brutality cases and civil rights settlements.

“It can be helpful for officers to have had military experience,” Magnus points out. “But, at the same time, we also want people who can ... show empathy with victims of crime, who are not afraid to smile, to get out of the police car and interact in a positive way with people, who can demonstrate emotional intelligence, who are good listeners, who have patience, who don’t feel that it takes away from their authority to demonstrate kindness.”

## 4. Staying away from guns

Magnus has consistently promoted new training programs and the acquisition of nonlethal weaponry, including Tasers and pepper spray, designed to minimize the use of deadly force.

Richmond now participates, along with five other cities, in the nationwide Violence Reduction Network sponsored by the United States Department of Justice. The network is supporting an upcoming seminar on “procedural justice” for members of the Richmond Police Department, which will focus, in part, on the problem of “unconscious bias” in police interactions with the public.

To conduct this training, Magnus has enlisted the services of University of South Florida criminologist Lorie Fridell, who has researched and written about the problem of law enforcement officers acting unfairly based on unconscious associations between members of racial minorities and crime.

## **When violence still breaks out**

However well these changes have worked, police reformers in Richmond don’t get to rest on their laurels for long. On September 14, a fatal encounter took place between Wallace Jensen, an officer on foot patrol, and 24-year-old Richard Perez III. Already on probation for a previous gun incident, Perez was intoxicated and resisted arrest after a liquor store clerk reported that he had been shoplifting.

According to the responding officer, Perez tried to wrestle his gun away. The three bullets fired at Perez resulted in Richmond’s first deadly “officer-involved shooting” since 2007. Some in the victim’s family wondered why the officer failed to use his Taser or nightstick to subdue Perez. The family retained a civil rights lawyer, who has threatened to sue the city.

Meanwhile, Perez’s aunt invited Chris Magnus to the funeral, which he and Deputy Chief Brown attended in civilian clothes. Magnus also deployed his social media skills to disseminate detailed information about parallel investigations into the incident being conducted by the RPD’s Professional Standards Unit and the Contra Costa County District Attorney’s Office.

“One of the things we tried to convey is that we have genuine sympathy for the family and acknowledge that the death of this young man is tragic,” Magnus said, noting that the “officer involved had to make a very tough decision in a matter of seconds.”

The setting being Richmond, where the police department has worked on its relationship with residents, the incident was different from Mike Brown’s shooting in a number of ways. Both Perez and Jensen were Latino speakers of Spanish. As a member of the department’s crisis negotiation team, Jensen has received regular training on how to handle volatile situations. He remains on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of the two investigations into his conduct.

Even in a city held up as a model for better policing, relationships with the community are being tested once again. It took nearly a decade of change in the culture of the department and a supportive city leadership to get this far—that’s an indication of how long and difficult the road ahead will be in other places.

*Steve Early wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas and practical actions. Early is a journalist and author who lives in Richmond, California. He belongs to the Richmond Progressive Alliance and is currently working on a book about progressive public policy initiatives and political change in the city. He can be reached at [Lsupport@aol.com](mailto:Lsupport@aol.com).*