

St. Louis Family Shows Mistrust of Cops Spans Generations

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Before Doris Davies watched two police officers shoot and kill a knife-wielding black man steps from her St. Louis porch last week, she had spent decades teaching her children rules for surviving encounters with law enforcement: Avoid eye contact. Make no sudden movements. Speak in submissive tones.

Her son, Corliss Banks, credits those lessons with helping him avoid trouble each time police questioned him in what he considered racially motivated traffic stops. As he taught the same guidelines to his children, he also passed down an abiding mistrust for police that permeates black communities from Los Angeles to New York.

“In our life, we see a bunch of stuff go down -- people getting beat up by police for no reason,” said Corliss Davies, 19, who shares his uncle’s first name, his grandmother’s dark skin and his entire family’s disdain for local law enforcement. “And there ain’t nothing we can do. Who do you report the police to?”

The Aug. 9 killing of an unarmed black teenager by a white officer in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, has damaged the already strained relationship between police and residents in the St. Louis area, while highlighting similar rifts across the U.S. Responding to two weeks of protests, the nation’s first black president

and first black attorney general have cast such chasms as a threat to domestic order.

Mutual Suspicion

“There is a history to these tensions, and that history simmers in more communities than Ferguson,” U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder told reporters Aug. 21 after a visit to Ferguson. “The national outcry we’ve seen speaks to a sense of mistrust and mutual suspicion that can take hold in the relationship between law enforcement and certain communities.”

President Barack Obama told reporters Aug. 18 that a “gulf of mistrust” exists between police and many communities, with blacks often seen as “objects of fear.” Hours later in Ferguson, dozens of mostly white police in armored trucks fired tear gas and stun grenades into a crowd of mostly black protesters.

About 60 percent of whites have “a great deal or quite a lot of confidence” in police, compared with 37 percent for blacks, according to an Aug. 20 report by Gallup. While only 12 percent of whites say they have “very little” or no confidence, one in four blacks feels that way.

No Reason

Doris Davies falls into the latter group. So do her son and grandsons. Each tells stories about police stopping them without cause.

“I pull over, he gets out of his car, walks by my truck and runs his hands along the side,” said Banks, describing an incident this year, one of several traffic stops he’s had while driving his black Infiniti QX sport-utility vehicle. “Now, I’m real pissed.”

Banks, 50, said he bottled his anger as he perceived the officer’s caressing of his vehicle to be condescending. The officer eventually let him go, without ever explaining the reason for the stop. Banks said he was released after the officer called in backup and a second policeman recognized him as a local business owner.

William Johnson, executive director of the Alexandria, Virginia-based National Association of Police Organizations, said it was “overly broad” to cast relations between police and blacks as fraught with distrust.

“When people talk about ‘the police’ as if it’s a monolithic, featureless collective devoid of the characteristics of individual men and women, it’s misleading and inaccurate,” Johnson said in an e-mail responding to remarks by Holder and Obama.

More Encounters

Blacks encounter police more often because they live disproportionately in poor areas with high crime rates, said Eugene O'Donnell, a former New York police officer who teaches law at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan.

Forty-eight police officers were killed by felons and more than 50,000 were assaulted in the line of duty in 2012, according to the most recent final data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Many who were killed or injured were fighting crime in black communities.

Protesters were still gathering to call for murder charges against the officer who shot 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson when police killed 25-year-old Kajieme Powell less than five miles (eight kilometers) away. A video of the Aug. 19 shooting released by St. Louis police shows Powell approaching two officers with a knife in one hand saying, "Kill me now," before being gunned down.

'Everybody's Upset'

St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson said the officers fired only after Powell got within four feet of them, causing them to fear for their safety.

Doris Davies, 66, who witnessed the shooting, said it was another example of the type of heavy-handed policing she's warned her children about.

"Even if he had a knife, they had guns!" she said of the two officers, who have been placed on administrative duty pending an investigation. "Everybody's upset about what's happening to young black guys."

One in four black males between ages 18 and 34 said they had been treated unfairly by police within the last 30 days, according to a 2013 poll cited in Gallup's Aug. 20 report.

In Ferguson, where two-thirds of residents are black and 94 percent of police are white, tales of mistreatment were regularly exchanged between demonstrators last week as they protested Brown's shooting death.

Traffic Stops

Fines and court fees are the city's second-largest source of revenue, according to a report by ArchCity Defenders, a St. Louis legal aid firm. While blacks make up 67 percent of the population, they accounted for 86 percent of the traffic stops last year, according to state data.

“People who aren’t black think if you get pulled over or stopped that, ‘Oh, you must have been doing something wrong.’” said Cornelius Washington, a 69-year-old retiree who lives in nearby Jennings, Missouri. “They don’t understand.”

The fatal encounter between Brown and the police officer who killed him, Darren Wilson, began in the street. Brown was walking with a friend in the middle of the road when Wilson, who is white, approached him, police said.

A struggle ensued and Brown was shot at least six times, according to results of an independent autopsy released last week. Police said Brown attacked the officer, while some residents say the teen raised his hands in surrender before he was killed. His funeral will be held today.

The death has sparked protests nationwide from Miami to New York to Houston, with residents complaining of racial profiling and excessive force by police.

During his visit to Ferguson, Holder recounted his own experience of being stopped twice by police on the New Jersey Turnpike. He said the Justice Department will seek new initiatives to mend the rift between blacks and police.

“We will continue the conversation this incident has sparked about the need for trust-building between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve,” he said.

