

San Diego police deny trigger-happy charges

[5,6 Edition]

The San Diego Union - San Diego, Calif.

Author: John Gaines

Date: Sep 21, 1990

Start Page: B.1

Section: LOCAL

Text Word Count: 548

Document Text

Top San Diego law enforcement officials last night defended their officers against charges that they are increasingly willing to "draw, shoot first and ask questions later."

At a televised forum following an apparent increase of police shootings this year, San Diego Police Chief Bob Burgreen heard charges that "community standards" on what appears reasonable are taking a back seat to police regulations on what officers can do when threatened.

"The public is starting to say, in terms of the shootings, we need to look at that, because there is something wrong," said Andrea Skorepa, chairwoman of a citizen's advisory board on police- community relations. "People who should not be shot are being shot and we have to do something about it."

Police officials and a number of officers in the audience responded that the number of police shootings pales when compared with assaults on police -- 1,550 in the last five years, one officer said. Burgreen added: "No police officer...goes to work wanting to be involved in a shooting."

The community forum -- televised by KNSD-Channel 39 as part of its "Third Thursday" series -- struck a nerve, both with police supporters, who hissed at some of the criticism, and the long line of people outside the auditorium at the Educational Cultural Complex in Southeast San Diego.

The station reported 2,000 requests for tickets, and 270 of the luckier ones watched a demonstration of alternative weapons that police are exploring and the interactive video that police use for training in the split-second decisions they must make.

In addition to nine fatal shootings by San Diego police this year, 13 other shootings by them have resulted in injury.

Critics of the recent shootings said they fear police are now too quick to shoot, perhaps after seeing unusual numbers of their colleagues killed in the early 1980s. San Diego now ranks third in fatal shootings per capita nationally, said Michael Crowley of the American Civil Liberties Union.

"It's difficult for the public to understand ... when it would seem to the average Joe Schmo that there's no reason to kill that person," said Arthur Ellis, a member of the Citizens Review Board on Police Practices. "Police tend to be more willing to draw, shoot first and ask questions later."

The district attorney's office, which reviews police shootings, also came in for criticism for finding that all but one of about 200 shootings since 1980 were justified.

Chief deputy district attorney Brian Michaels responded that the facts of those findings had been questioned on only

one occasion -- an indication that prosecution would have been unwarranted. Other panelists said the policy surrounding shooting reviews makes it virtually certain that the actions will be upheld.

Michaels also said that of the first 10 cases of lethal force this year, eight involved a victim with a gun or knife -- cases that got much less attention than recent deaths of a man brandishing a masonry trowel or another holding a wooden garden stake.

Burgreen, who is now heading an internal Police Department review of shooting policies, noted that four officers had been shot and wounded this year, the most recent shot missing the officer's jugular vein by an eighth of an inch.

Credit: Staff Writer

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

At a televised forum following an apparent increase of police shootings this year, San Diego Police Chief Bob Burgreen heard charges that "community standards" on what appears reasonable are taking a back seat to police regulations on what officers can do when threatened.

Police officials and a number of officers in the audience responded that the number of police shootings pales when compared with assaults on police -- 1,550 in the last five years, one officer said. Burgreen added: "No police officer...goes to work wanting to be involved in a shooting."

Critics of the recent shootings said they fear police are now too quick to shoot, perhaps after seeing unusual numbers of their colleagues killed in the early 1980s. San Diego now ranks third in fatal shootings per capita nationally, said Michael Crowley of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.