36th KZGN News Talking Points Editorial

What is causing all these incidents with police departments?

We’ve all seen the news lately event after event where it appears some person is being treated badly by a police officer. I have to wonder what is causing these events. Each event is individual in its causes. Often we don’t see what led up to a particular event, until way after the video of the alleged bad treatment goes viral on the internet. I have to admit, I am a little biased towards supporting police officers, as I am a volunteer with the Ridgecrest department.

However, I too have seen, just as most of you have seen, some events where bad officers did bad things. These officers should be dealt with in accordance with the law. But again, I still wonder, why is this happening? What starts these situations? What is the first root cause of them? Forget everything about police officer training, race, profiling, environment, mental condition, or anything else we use to try and discuss criminal activity. What starts the event that leads up to a situation where an officer reacts using force to try and control a situation? What happens?

Well, we find that most events start with an officer observing something suspicious. The officer, as tasked with the responsibility by the people to protect and serve, then starts investigating the situation. So, there’s where it starts. However, nothing has gone wrong yet. Usually then the officer will ask the person of his attention for ID or the officer might just try and engage a person in conversation while trying to get information. Where it goes from here is totally up to the person being addressed by the officer. From initial contact, the whole thing can go along very nice and easy, or turn into something not nice. If the person being contacted starts not answering officers questions, or not following directions given by officers, things can go bad real quick. In just a second, a seemly minor contact can turn into something deadly. I’ve seen it myself. A very simple contact goes sour in seconds for no obvious reason.

It comes down to this. If the person being contacted would just answer the officer’s questions, and not get hostile, or even worse, run, then all would go fine. It could be an officer just trying to help in an investigation of something. The person being contacted is not a suspect at all. Just someone the officer is trying to get information from about something that might have happened in the neighborhood. Many bad situations started by just a simple officer trying to pull over a car with a burnt out tail lite, or minor traffic violation. Then the person takes off. They are ordered to stop by the officer. Do they stop? No, they continue to run. Why? Why do they run? Why does the person in the car not stop when the red lights of a police car come on behind them? Why doesn’t the person in a car just pull over to the right like they are supposed to? The red lights might not even be for them. It could be just an officer is trying to get around them to a call. Why doesn’t the person running just stop and answer the officer’s questions? I was raised by my parents and school teachers, who taught us that when approached by a police officer, do what they say. If red lights come on behind you while driving, pull over to the right and stop. We were taught that police officers were our friends and could be trusted. So, where is this mind set of today coming from? We see high speed vehicle pursuits almost daily. We see people giving police officers a bad time by not following their instructions. Currently there are over 700,000 police officers in the United States. Is it possible there are some bad officers in that number? Of course, sure there are bad officers. And they need to be dealt with. But I have to ask these questions: Are parents still teaching their kids that police officers are ok to trust? It’s ok to talk to them? Are teachers in our schools teaching the same things?

That if an officer comes up to them and asks some questions and then asks for an ID, then just show your ID to the officer. Don’t run. That will just makes things worse. As one that has just recently gone through California police officer training, I can say this for a fact. They constantly pounded on us to respect the civil rights of all those people we contact. Always consider the rights of the person you may make contact with. We spent many hours discussing the many levels of force permitted, depending on the level of the crime. Deadly force is the last alternative. When it can be used is very specific and restricted.

But this editorial is not about the results of a person not doing what is asked by an officer.

It’s about why do people not follow instructions? I see this interaction between our officers and the public almost every time I’m on duty. 99% of the time officers are just engaging people to acquire information. After a short conversation, the officer thanks the person and they go their way. Often times, the officer and the contact leave each other shaking hands. Or an officer pulls someone over for a minor traffic violation. By California law the officer has great discretion on how a traffic stop is handled. Most of the time, if the person pulled over is respectful and follows instructions, there is a good chance they get off with a warning. But if a person starts going off on the officer, or starts acting real erratic, the officer gets suspicious and needs to determine the source of whatever this person is agitated about. Anyway, while it is obvious there are bad cops. These cops need to be discovered and dealt with. But the vast majority is just like you and me. They just chose the job of police officer. If all parents and teachers would get back to the basic instruction to students, police officers can be trusted. If they stop to talk with you, stop and answer their questions. There is no need to fear an officer. Don’t run when approached. If red lights come on behind you when you’re driving, pull over. Don’t run. Again, this editorial was intended to try and get to the root of the start of a bad officer citizen contact. I offered no attempt to analyze the way a bad contact plays out. Only what starts it to go bad. If people would just stop when requested, these incidents of bad situations would go down greatly.

In conclusion, the Ridgecrest police department has a saying posted on the door officers see as they exit the station to go out to their cars. Paraphrased, it says this: We provide a service to the people of Ridgecrest. Make sure you provide the best service you can. Pretty good goal.

I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think. If you have any comments about this editorial, or would like to discuss or recommend a topic, I’d like to hear from you. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.