U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

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Law Enforcement Bulletin

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Civil Disorder
Preparing for the Worst

By
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During an April 1991 conference on future trends in policing held at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, speakers made an especially disturbing prediction. Citing a number of factors, these experts raised the specter of increased numbers of civil disturbances worldwide during the 1990s. One year after the conference, violent rioting in several American cities in the wake of the Rodney King verdict seemed to confirm this prediction.
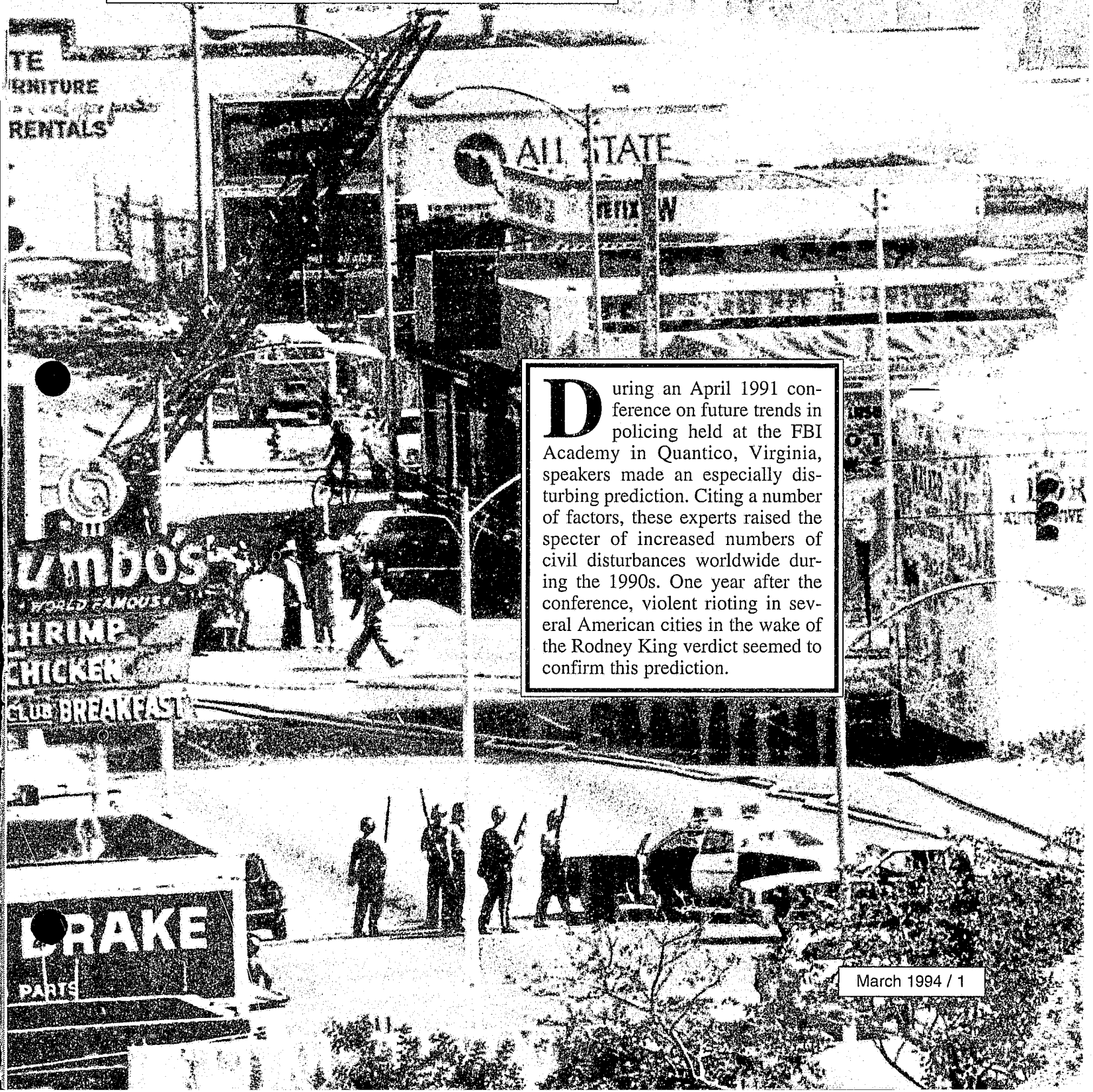
While the media quickly drew parallels between the riots of 1992 and those of the late 1960s, these comparisons are of limited value from a tactical perspective. In fact, reaction to the King verdict in the epicenter of the riots—South Central Los Angeles—followed a pattern much closer to the civil disturbance that erupted in Miami, Florida, in May 1980, following the acquittal of five Dade County police officers accused of beating a black motorcyclist. Unlike the gradual escalation of violence in the riots of the 1960s, acts of murder during the Miami riot occurred within minutes of the first signs of disturbance.[1] This pattern of rapid and violent escalation was reaffirmed during the disorder in Los Angeles.

In response to what appears to be the dual threat of more frequent and more violent civil disturbances, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies develop effective plans to meet this challenge. By preparing for the worst, public safety agencies can take steps to help prevent it from occurring.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CIVIL DISORDER

Studies of the violent riots in Los Angeles and Miami, as well as a series of disturbances that took place in the Miami area throughout the 1980s, reveal a clear pattern in modern civil unrest. The seven elements of this pattern include:

- An incident or community event that is perceived negatively by a segment of the community serves as the catalyst

- Small—but very violent—groups of people take advantage of the situation and begin engaging in seemingly random acts of violence, such as throwing rocks and bottles, attacking innocent bystanders, and shooting at the police. (In fact, these attacks are generally planned and directed at specific types of victims.)

- This same small group initiates isolated acts of looting and arson

- As more citizens become involved, there is a gradual but steady increase in incidents of looting and arson

- Widespread acts of civil disruption—attacks on innocent people, looting, arson, sniper attacks—overwhelm law enforcement's ability to maintain control

- Many segments of the community join in, creating a "carnival-like" atmosphere

- After several days, activities gradually cease due to a large influx of police resources and a lack of interest on the part of citizens in the affected areas.

When a disturbance finally calms, it leaves behind a multitude of questions, along with smoldering fires and ravaged storefronts. By searching for answers to these questions, law enforcement agencies and communities can be better prepared to respond—or preferably, to prevent—future incidents.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS

By analyzing its experiences with civil disorder during the past decade, the Miami Police Department identified seven key elements critical to the diffusion of unrest.

1) *Time*—Once a disturbance begins, time is the enemy of law enforcement. Therefore, it becomes vitally important that the police department gather

" *Preparation is the single most important step law enforcement agencies can take to ensure that small disturbances do not grow into major incidents.* "

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resources and suppress disruptive activities before violence spreads and large numbers of the affected community join the initial rioters

2) *Resources*—While the department must respond as quickly as possible, it must do so with sufficient resources to handle multiple incidents that occur during an outbreak of civil disorder

3) *Goals*—Before an incident occurs, the department should formulate an organizational philosophy and develop a prioritized set of goals regarding the management of civil disorder

4) *Specialized Tactics*—The department must develop specialized tactics to deal with the unique policing conditions required during periods of civil unrest

5) *Plan of Action*—The police department should develop a detailed, written plan of action, addressing resources, personnel, and command requirements

6) *Training*—On a continual basis, the department should conduct riot training, reinforcing the plans and tactics that have been developed

7) *Critique and Update*—The police department must continually critique and update its planning and training so that its personnel are at a constant state of readiness.

The lessons learned by the Miami Police Department are relevant to any urban law enforcement agency that may confront civil unrest. Using these seven critical areas as a basis, departments can organize a response strategy.

PREVENTION THROUGH PREPARATION

Having identified stages in the evolution of modern urban riots and having learned lessons from past

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...communication should not be limited to internal information exchanged among police components.

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incidents of civil disorder, the department then addressed another important issue. How can police departments best deal with major civil crises?

The answer lies in preparation—one area where the police maintain complete control. Preparation is the single most important step law enforcement agencies can take to ensure that small disturbances do not grow into major incidents. Effective preparation is, in fact, the best form of prevention.

Administrators should focus on the following issues when developing response strategies—organizational philosophy, preplanning, mobile tactical field force concept, written civil disorder plan, and effective training. Each of these components must be addressed in some way for an agency to be adequately prepared for civil disorder.

Organizational Philosophy

A police agency must determine its philosophy concerning the management of civil disorder well in advance of the outbreak of unrest. In the wake of several disturbances during the past decade, the Miami Police Department developed such a philosophy, based on containment, communication, coordination, and control.

Containment

The first priority after an outbreak of civil disorder is to identify the affected geographical areas and to seal them off as quickly as possible. This containment is essential for two reasons. First, law enforcement must ensure that innocent people do not enter areas where hostile crowds are present. Second, it is important to isolate lawbreakers and to limit others from coming into the affected areas to join in disruptive and violent activities.

Communication

Communication, the second element, must begin at the onset of disorder and continue throughout the incident. Realistically, the process of communication flows in multiple directions—most importantly from field units to the emergency operations center (EOC)—where information concerning the type and size of the crowd, the level of violence, and the needed resources and equipment will be relayed. The EOC must then

report response estimates, criminal intelligence, and specific strategies back to field units.

However, communication should not be limited to internal information exchanged among police components. It is crucial that commanders in the EOC maintain constant contact with other government, civic, and community organizations. These contacts should include, but are not limited to, fire, sanitation, public works, and correctional agencies, as well as prosecutors' offices. If possible, representatives from certain major elements of emergency response, such as the fire and public works departments, should maintain a presence in the EOC to expedite response activities.

Coordination

Once effective communication has been established, the third element—coordination—is critical. At this stage, field requests for additional personnel and equipment become operational realities. Operational units must be directed to the most critically affected areas in order to address the most pressing problems.

To a large degree, successful coordination depends on maintaining good communication. Commanders must also understand that, as with communication, effective coordination of response efforts is an ongoing undertaking as needs, available resources, and problem areas continually change during a crisis.

Control

In the final stage—control—law enforcement moves in and establishes control of the situation with mobile field forces, arrest squads, and special weapons and

tactics (SWAT) teams. To be most effective and safe, the three prior elements of containment, communication, and coordination must be successfully implemented before the control phase becomes operational.

Preplanning

After developing an organizational philosophy, agencies face a variety of planning issues. Preplanning allows administrators to address issues in a calm and nonstressful environment. This saves time during the first critical hours of an actual disturbance. Specific areas of concern include civil disorder demographics, procedures, command and control, and personnel.

Civil disorder demographics

In a broad sense, demographics is the study of societies and trends. Similarly, civil disorder demographics analyzes trends and other factors common to civil disorder.

Such issues as the types of weapon used by rioters in past incidents are important when equipping field forces and determining appropriate countermeasures. The layout of the streets and alleys of potentially affected areas becomes critical in establishing perimeters and ensuring that mobile field forces cannot be ambushed.

Response units should be able to quickly identify and protect probable targets of looting, such as liquor stores, gas stations, and gun shops. Also, as part of civil disorder demographics, law enforcement must make an effort to understand the type of people involved and the alleged cause of their protest.

Procedures

Ensuring that commanders and officers understand accepted procedures is another important element of the preplanning process. Put succinctly, procedures cover who does what and how they do it.

Planners must determine if existing procedures conflict with one another and if they are consistent with the agency's philosophy. Also, officers need to know what equipment to secure and where to obtain it. It is paramount that agencies answer these procedural questions before any outbreak of unrest.

Command and control

Arguments between senior officers regarding matters of command or individual responsibilities at a time of crisis can needlessly delay response times of field units. Within the Miami Police Department, lines of authority are clearly established and approved by the chief. Likewise, specific responsibilities for strategic and tactical decisionmaking are prearranged and ready for implementation should unrest erupt.

During an incident, the EOC commander makes all strategic decisions, such as identifying the resources that will be allocated to specific problems, while the field commander oversees tactical decisions regarding *how* objectives established by the EOC are going to be met. However, preplanning helps to eliminate unnecessary conflicts and allows the agency to focus its efforts on the real problems.

Personnel

Personnel represents the greatest resource *and* the single largest problem in the effective management of civil disorders. Allocation of personnel will ultimately be the key to success or failure.

With regard to personnel, agencies must first address the issue of supply and demand. To determine supply, agencies should conduct a detailed survey of all officers and support employees to determine their assignments and work hours.

After completing this survey, administrators must review the established civil disorder plans to determine personnel requirements—or demand—in case of civil unrest. Areas of concern should include the number of individuals needed to fill perimeter posts, special details, and field force assignments to handle routine calls for service, protect vulnerable businesses, ensure station security, and continue staffing essential units, such as investigations and media relations.

These projections will present planners with two sets of figures—one for supply and one for demand. In a perfect world, these two sets of numbers would be approximately equal. More likely, however, planners will be required to reevaluate human resource needs carefully and reconcile them with available personnel.

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Still, under no circumstances should administrators plan down to the last officer. Reality dictates that when emergency mobilization begins, commanders may only be able to contact 60 to 70 percent of the agency's personnel. Therefore, a plan that depends on all officers reporting for duty is almost certainly doomed to failure.

Planners should pay close attention to the work shifts and the number of hours personnel will be asked to work. In the Miami Police Department, all officers and certain critical civilian personnel, such as radio dispatchers, switch to 12-hour shifts during emergency mobilization. All vacations and leave—with the exception of sick leave—are canceled.

The department employs an "Alpha/Bravo" configuration, with the Alpha shift working from 4 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the Bravo shift working from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. Officer assignments to the two groups have been predetermined in the organizational plan. For the most part, officers who normally work daytime shifts are assigned to the Alpha group, while personnel who ordinarily work afternoon and night shifts make up the Bravo group. Any balancing of the work force should be accomplished on a unit, not an individual, basis. Usually, this balancing involves moving additional daytime personnel to the night shift when rioters are more active.

After allocating personnel and assigning them to shifts, planners may think that the most difficult personnel-related tasks have been completed. Nothing could be further from the truth. During an actual mobilization, the real problems begin when an entire shift—perhaps as many as 600 officers—arrives at once and need to be given specific assignments.

During emergency mobilization in the Miami Police Department, all incoming officers report to a personnel allocation desk at the entrance of the headquarters building. After receiving their specific assignments, officers wear

color-coded wristbands that identify their particular area of assignment. This enables supervisors to determine at a glance which officers have been assigned to what areas. In the first chaotic hours of a major civil disturbance, a system of this type might make the difference between fielding officers in time to contain the situation or responding after control of the streets has already been lost.

The Mobile Field Force Concept

The mobile field force concept now used by the Miami Police Department represents a radical departure from the line formation and crowd control techniques of the past. It was developed after the violent riots of 1980 to maximize the impact of resources available to the department.

The mobile field force is comprised of 54 officers divided into 6 squads, each supervised by a lieutenant. Individual squads consist of one sergeant and seven officers who ride in two patrol vehicles. An arrest wagon driven by two additional field force officers rounds out the force.

This highly mobile force provides commanders with a variety of response options. For example, commanders can deliver 54 officers to a single problem area rapidly. The psychological effect of 14 police vehicles—all with sirens operating—can be overwhelming and often causes crowds to disperse upon approach.

Additionally, individual squads can be detached to handle specific problems or to hold objectives previously taken by the police. In fact,

because of its mobility, flexibility, and ability to respond to any part of the city quickly, the mobile field force can be used in almost unlimited ways. This force gives departments the ability to deliver large numbers of people to a single problem area or groups of officers to several problem areas at the same time. In short, it gives the police a valuable tactical edge.

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Civil Disorder Plan

An old expression familiar to everyone in law enforcement holds that no job is complete until the paperwork is done. This is especially true with regard to preparing for civil disorder. After investing time and resources in developing preplanning procedures and forming a mobile field force, agencies should record the information in a written civil disorder plan.[2]

The plan should address all the issues identified in the preplanning process. It should be sufficiently specific to include such information as unit assignments and wristband identification codes. The document should also include specific

information on perimeter posts to be held, forms to be used, and specific responsibilities of the emergency operations command. To be of value, the plan must be straightforward and easily understood.

Finally, the civil disorder plan must be a "living" document. If it rests on a shelf after being written, it may no longer be viable when the need arises to implement it. Therefore, members of the command staff should review the plan at least once a year. A careful critique should follow any training scenarios or actual incidents in which the plan is used. Following a critique, administrators should make any adjustments necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the plan.

Training

The final step in preparing for civil disorder involves training. Administrators should keep in mind that no matter how well developed the written plan may be, nothing teaches it as well as practical experience.

Twice a year, the Miami Police Department conducts civil disorder training for all sworn personnel. This training includes practical exercises in the field force concept, line formations, and tactics.

Ideally, training should be made as realistic as possible and should include physical confrontation and (if applicable) the use of chemical agents. Training exercises should be designed to place both mental and physical stress on participants to condition their reactions.

Additionally, in Miami, command and supervisory personnel receive further classroom instruction

in command and control issues. They also review details of the written civil disorder plan.

Because it represents a huge commitment of personnel, the training component of civil disorder control can be costly to law enforcement agencies. However, the cost of not training can be far greater in terms of damage to the community and lives lost if officers do not respond effectively.

CONCLUSION

Police agencies have a fundamental duty to protect lives and property in the communities they serve. A major incident of public disorder represents one of the most severe challenges to that obligation.

Although the likelihood of large-scale public disturbances may appear remote, a number of factors make such events a distinct possibility in communities across the Nation. By studying these factors on a national, as well as local, level and by analyzing the characteristics of urban disorder, public safety officials will be in a better position to manage and prepare for such incidents. Then, by developing effective response plans, agencies can reduce the likelihood of minor disturbances evolving into widespread violent assaults on civil order. ✦

Endnotes

[1] Bruce Porter and Marvin Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980—Crossing the Bounds* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1984), 173.

[2] A copy of the Miami Police Department's civil disorder plan is available to law enforcement agencies upon request. Write to the Miami Police Department, Support Services Section, P.O. Box 016777, Miami, FL 33101.

1992 Hate Crimes

Data compiled by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program reveal that most hate crimes reported to law enforcement are motivated by racial bias. The data were reported by 6,180 law enforcement agencies in 41 States and the District of Columbia, which cover 53 percent of the U.S. population. The number of law enforcement agencies participating in the FBI's statistical program, which was initiated in response to the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990, grew by 123 percent when compared to the number of agencies reporting in 1991.

Racial bias motivated 6 of every 10 hate crimes reported in 1992; religious bias, 2 of every 10; and ethnic and sexual-orientation bias each, 1 of every 10. Among the specific bias types, antiblack offenses accounted for the highest proportion, 36 percent, followed by antiwhite and anti-Jewish motivations, 21 and 13 percent, respectively.

Crimes Committed

Among the 8,918 racially motivated offenses, intimidation was the most frequently reported hate crime, accounting for 37 percent of the total. Destruction/damage/vandalism of property followed with 23 percent; simple assault, 20 percent; aggravated assault, 16 percent; and robbery, 2 percent. The remaining offense types (murder, forcible rape, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson) each accounted for 1 percent or less of the total.

Offenders

In 38 percent of the incidents reported, information concerning the offenders was unknown. However, for incidents in which the suspected race of the offender was reported, 64 percent of the hate crimes were committed by whites, 33 percent by blacks, and 1 percent by persons of other races. The remaining incidents were committed by groups in which the offenders were not all of the same race. ✦