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WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

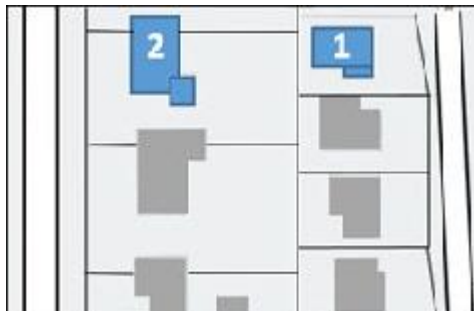
Wary cops, uncompliant citizens and troubled communities



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. What's undisputed is that during the mid-morning hours of Tuesday, February 21, Hemet, Calif. police officers went to a single-family residence "in the 800 block of South Harvard Street" to investigate a theft. While an officer was in this home's rear yard (we'll call it house #1) he unexpectedly came across an adult male in the rear yard of an "adjacent" residence (we'll call that house #2). He was armed with a handgun. The cop promptly shot the man dead.

That man's name was Christian Drye. He was 30 years of age and lived in house #2 with his wife, Shameka, and their five children.

Hemet PD's [brief online post](#) and a flurry of accounts in the media mostly agree on the basics. But the latter offer some troubling details furnished by the victim's wife. [According to NBCLA](#), Shameka Drye said that Hemet officers came to their home (house #2) because "someone involved in a theft sneak" was supposedly in their backyard. But her husband refused to grant them permission to enter "without a search warrant." Instead, he said that he had a legal, registered gun and would go check himself. Officers supposedly let him while giving "zero warning".



This "warning," we assume, would have been that officers at house #1 might be troubled by a non-cop's armed presence. And there was another complication. What's missing from the accounts we've read is that the homes aren't side-by-side. House #1 is on Harvard Street. But the victim's

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residence, house #2, is on a parallel street. A see-through fence separates the rear yards. That placed the two sets of cops far apart, creating a disconnect that could greatly complicate things should stuff happen.

Like a cop at house #1 noticing the sudden appearance of an armed man at the rear of house #2.

Considering the outcome, we “assume” that the officers at house #2 didn’t alert their colleagues at house #1 about Mr. Drye, or not quickly enough to avoid a tragic misunderstanding. His spouse has filed a lawsuit and we’re certain that this issue will be fleshed out in time. In any event, Mr. Drye’s behavior greatly complicated an already-fraught landscape. His armed appearance likely startled the officer in the other yard. He probably felt threatened by the man’s proximity, and perhaps by the manner in which he carried his gun.

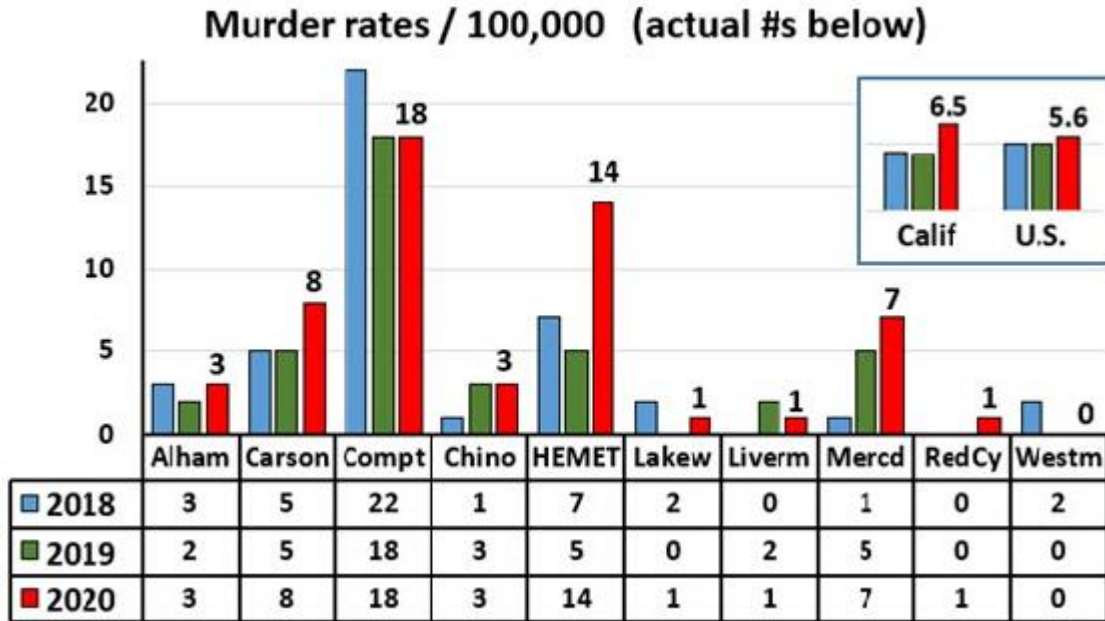
It wouldn’t be the first time that a cop has fired reflexively. In “[Three \(In?\)explicable Shootings](#)” we discussed the July 2017 killing of Justine Ruszczyk, a 9-1-1 caller who was shot dead by a Minneapolis cop who was startled when she slapped the trunk of his police car while unexpectedly walking up. That officer ([he wound up serving three years](#) for manslaughter) was reportedly hired despite concerns by psychiatrists. As in other examples we’ve mentioned, he may have been an unsuitable candidate from the start. Considering the reluctance of many citizens to voluntarily comply, being a cop calls for an abundance of risk tolerance. Impulsivity and aggressiveness can truly be shortcuts to disaster.

We know nothing about the officer who shot Mr. Drye. What’s more, it’s never only about individuals. Environment also matters. [A recent CNN piece](#) serves as a powerful reminder that Minneapolis – the city whose officers’ lousy behavior gave rise to the police defund movement – has long grappled with crime and violence. (Its well-known sobriquet is “Murderapolis”). Within its unforgiving atmosphere, senior officers, including [Derek Chauvin](#), were assigned to guide the newbies. As the city eventually discovered, the unholy combination of poor mentorship and “[highly charged, violence-laden environments](#)” can truly sabotage the craft of policing.

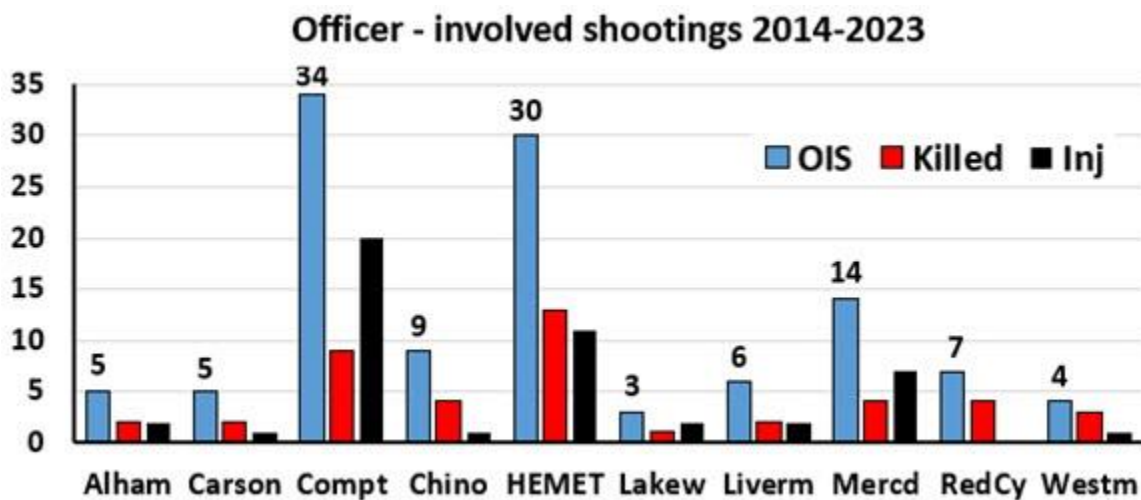
So what’s *Hemet* all about? Located in a rural area of Riverside County, about eighty miles southeast of Los Angeles, the [working-class city of about ninety-thousand](#) is 22.7 percent White, 23.3 percent Black and 25.6 percent Hispanic. Alas, its residents endure an unusually high poverty level of 23.7 percent, about twice Riverside County’s 11.6 percent and California’s 12.3 percent overall. As one might expect, Hemet’s lousy economics augur a substantial burden of crime and violence. Indeed, [USA.com’s crime index](#) ranks it 412 worst, crime-wise, out of 466 California cities.

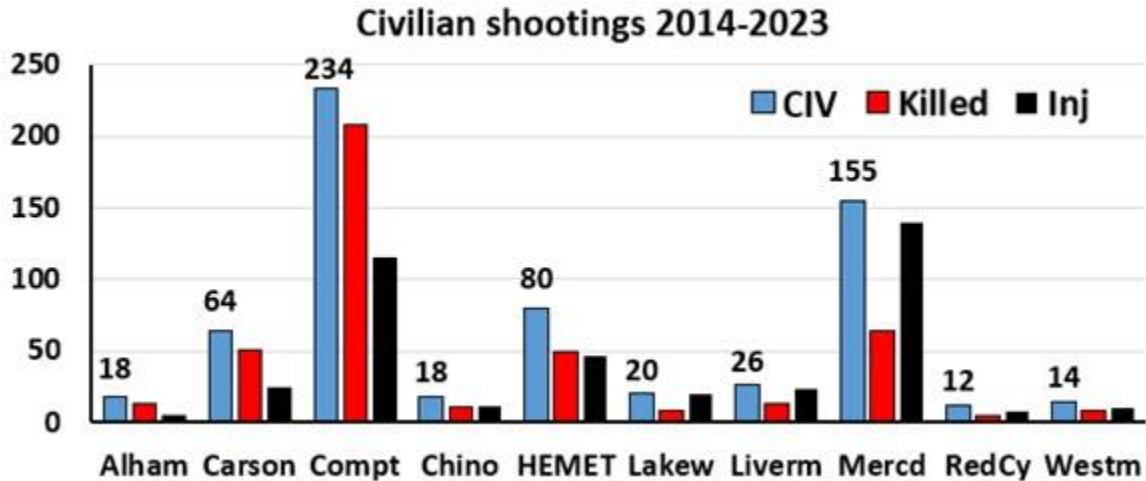
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[According to the UCR](#), Hemet’s violent crime rate, and particularly its homicide rate, have long been elevated. This graph uses 2018-2020 UCR data to compare Hemet murder-wise with California, U.S. and a random sample of nine California cities with populations from 80,000-100,000.



In line with its substantial murder rate, Hemet suffers from lots of gunplay, lethal and otherwise. These two graphs reflect a decade’s worth of officer-involved and civilian shooting incident data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#):





And the Archive can add [another civilian-on-civilian murder](#) to Hemet’s toll. It happened on February 22, one day after police killed Mr. Frye. What’s more, it’s not only the city’s innocents who fall victim to their deranged fellow residents. On January 21, the eve of Lunar New Year, [Hemet septuagenarian Huu Can Tran burst into a dance studio](#) in Monterey Park, about an hour’s drive away. Armed with an assault-style pistol, he opened fire on a crowd with which he had once mingled, killing ten and wounding ten others. Tran later committed suicide.

It’s not that *Police Issues* has an issue with the city. In a decade-and-a-half, none of our posts as much as mentioned Hemet. So when we heard about Mr. Drye’s tragic killing, we promptly turned to (what else?) Google. And what it revealed was quite disconcerting. Consider, for example, this [October 7, 2019 headline](#) from a well-known area media outlet, the *Palm Springs Desert Sun*:

Hemet, named one of “America’s Most Miserable” cities, has struggled since the Great Recession

Who named it that? None other than *Business Insider*. Check out its [September 28, 2019 feature story](#), which ranks Hemet as no. 44 in its list of “The 50 most miserable cities in America, based on Census data.”

Yikes. First responders are well aware of a city’s foibles. Hemet’s police officers know full well that their city’s rough edges present an elevated personal risk for both citizens and cops. Note that sobering frequency of officer-involved shootings, which falls just short of notoriously violent Compton (of which we *have* often written.) Could such things affect workplace attitudes? How could they not? Still, whatever their environs, the craft of policing demands that officers accept considerable personal risk. Here’s a bit of self-plagiarism from one of our very first posts, [“When Cops Kill \(Part II\)”](#):

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Considering the situations that officers regularly face, where things are often not what they seem, they must be able to tolerate considerable risk. In fact most do; if they didn't our streets would be lined with dead citizens. An overwhelming majority serve out their careers without killing anyone. That's not an indication, as some have implied, that they're slackers. On the contrary, it's evidence that they're sufficiently skilled, levelheaded and risk-tolerant to do their jobs without needlessly taking life.

Again, we know nothing about the officer who fired that shot. We're troubled, though, by the account given by Mr. Drye's wife. Did the officers at house #2 let her husband grab a gun and head to the back door without raising a stink? After all, they *had* to know what could happen. Or did Mr. Drye ignore their admonitions and behave as impulsively as the cop who gunned him down?

Over the years, our [Use of Force](#) and [Neighborhoods](#) posts have cautioned about the lethal combination of uncompliant citizens and edgy cops that besets down-on-their-luck places like Hemet. Alas, in our badly polarized society, changing citizen hearts and minds is probably a non-starter. But cops might listen to reason. Addressing (and, hopefully, *preventing*) catastrophes such as what happened in Hemet requires honest, deep discussions about the police workplace and the personalities of both citizens and cops. And these examinations must become a topic not just for training, but for roll-calls and everyday chatter.

Want a place to start? Here's an essay. No charge!