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Chauvin Verdict Brings the Police Relief and Some Resentment

Unions and chiefs applauded the guilty verdict against Derek Chauvin, but rank-and-file officers were left feeling anxious.



Inspector Charles Adams, a Minneapolis precinct's commanding officer, said that Derek Chauvin's actions were wrong and that they cast a negative light on policing.

By John Eligon and Shaila Dewan

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MINNEAPOLIS — It was shortly after 4 p.m. on Tuesday, and all chatter ceased in the roll-call room for the Fourth Police Precinct in North Minneapolis. Everyone's attention was glued to the television on the wall.

Then came the verdict: Derek Chauvin was guilty on all counts, including murder, for killing George Floyd last May. The station house stayed silent, the officers processing what the verdict meant after a year of tension and conflict, said Inspector Charles Adams, the precinct's commanding officer.

"It was just like, wow," Inspector Adams said.

For him, it was a relief — he felt that Mr. Chauvin had been wrong and that his actions, kneeling on Mr. Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, cast a negative light on policing.

But the verdict did little to end months of upheaval and anxiety in his profession.

“So much is being thrown at us as law enforcement officials,” Inspector Adams said. “We’re unsure how we’re going to police in the future.”

Police chiefs and unions across the country condemned Mr. Chauvin's actions and applauded the jury's verdict, but not always with the same zeal or for the same reasons. Some said they hoped it would restore faith in the criminal justice system. Others said it would help keep the peace. And still others indicated that it would clear the way for “honest discussion” about policing.

The feelings of rank-and-file officers were more complicated: a mix of relief, resentment at being vilified alongside Mr. Chauvin and unsettling thoughts of themselves in his shoes.

“They’re thinking, ‘Man, I’ve got to think long and hard before I get out of my car and get into something I don’t have to get into,’” said Jim Pasco, the executive director of the national Fraternal Order of Police.

In the Minneapolis station house, Inspector Adams heard of remarks from a few rank-and-file officers who believed the defense's argument that drugs killed Mr. Floyd and that Mr. Chauvin had followed his training.

“Some just think he got a raw deal,” Inspector Adams said. “But there’s a lot of them who think he was guilty, too.”

The full extent of the fallout for Mr. Chauvin will be known on June 16, when he is scheduled to be sentenced.

He is being held alone in a cell in a maximum-security prison in Oak Park Heights, Minn., a Twin Cities suburb. He is allowed out for exercise for only an hour each day. Even then, he is kept away from other inmates. Prison officials said Mr. Chauvin was being kept in solitary for his own safety.

Outside the Twin Cities, in rural communities where “Back the Blue” banners hang in storefronts, Mr. Chauvin's trial at times seemed a world away. There, largely white police departments patrol largely white communities, and residents are often friends or relatives of law enforcement officers.



Demonstrators celebrated Derek Chauvin's guilty verdict at the memorial where he killed George Floyd.

In Gilbert, Minn., a community of about 2,000 three hours north of Minneapolis, Ty Techar, the police chief, said he watched only about an hour of the trial and 30 seconds of the body-camera footage. While he said that what Mr. Chauvin did would be unacceptable in his department, he stopped short of saying he agreed with the verdict.

"For me to sit here and make a judgment on whether he got a fair trial, I don't know all the evidence," he said. "I haven't looked at it closely enough."

He added: "Is it second-degree murder or manslaughter? I don't know much about the case."

Police unions historically have been the staunchest defenders of officers, even those accused of wrongdoing. They did not defend Mr. Chauvin, but some used the verdict as an occasion to criticize public figures who have scrutinized the police.

The Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis said in a statement that it wanted "to reach out to the community and still express our deep remorse for their pain" and that "there are no winners in this case."

"We need the political pandering to stop and the race-baiting of elected officials to stop," the statement said. "In addition, we need to stop the divisive comments and we all need to do better to create a Minneapolis we all love."

Police and union officials have argued that the consistent pressure some community members and elected leaders place on law enforcement can be a detriment.

In Minneapolis, there are several efforts to significantly downsize the Police Department and create a new public safety division. The governor of Minnesota has come out in support of a bill to limit police traffic stops for minor infractions. The Justice Department on Wednesday announced a broad civil rights investigation into the Minneapolis Police Department.

Inspector Adams said that several officers were now hesitant to perform even some of the most basic duties like traffic stops, worrying that such situations might escalate and get them in trouble.

In New York, a union leader seemed to play on such anxieties.

“It is hard to imagine a tougher time to be a member of the law enforcement profession,” Ed Mullins, the president of the Sergeants Benevolent Association, wrote in a letter after the verdict was announced. He warned members that their every action was being recorded and that “scores of attorneys” were eager to sue them.

“Our elected officials are complicit in perpetuating the myth that we are the enemy,” he added.

Attitudes like that, activists said, speak to the resistance of law enforcement to be held accountable and allow police abuses to continue.

Some police officials said the backlash to Mr. Chauvin’s actions actually provided an opportunity to improve.

“I think it takes us a step closer toward reform,” said Michael S. Harrison, Baltimore’s police commissioner. “It doesn’t make it harder to do our jobs. It makes it where we have to train better, and use best practices and we have to do our job the right way.”

The guilty verdict was a significant reminder for officers to stay within their training, said Rick Smith, the police chief in Kansas City, Mo.

“I think officers understand that going outside the norms leads to potential issues,” he said. “And this one highlighted that in the hundredth degree across the nation.”

Inspector Adams said he believed that the judicial process ultimately helped the profession regain some of its credibility. Nine current and retired members of the Minneapolis Police Department testified against Mr. Chauvin at trial, including the police chief.

That testimony, Inspector Adams said, showed the public that Mr. Chauvin was not representative of the Minneapolis police. The prosecution’s assertion during closing arguments that its case was against Mr. Chauvin, not the police, also helped, he said.

After Chief Medaria Arradondo testified that Mr. Chauvin acted outside of department policy, Inspector Adams said he texted him to say he was proud to belong to his staff.

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