

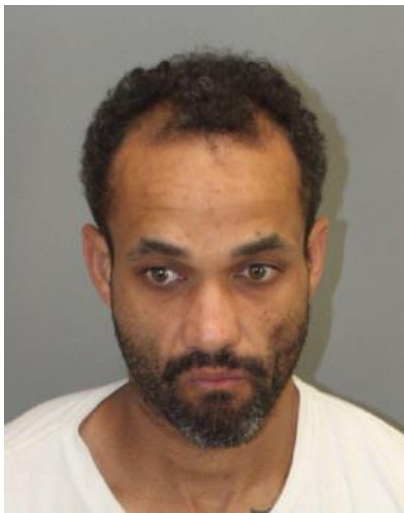


Death of man in handcuffs to be reviewed by Riverside police watchdog

Dominic Smith, 37, was screaming and armed with nunchucks at a Stater Bros.' before his arrest, police say.

By ALI TADAYON / STAFF WRITER

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COURTESY OF RIVERSIDE COMMUNITY POLICE REVIEW COMMISSION

Clarification: The public portion of the commission meeting will begin at 5:30 p.m. Jan. 26.

A Riverside police watchdog agency will be briefed next week on the death of a 37-year-old man who was causing a disturbance at a grocery store, was detained at a nearby park and, while handcuffed, began to have trouble breathing.

The official cause of Dominic Smith's death Dec. 29 has not been determined, according to a report compiled by Riverside police Capt. Larry Gonzalez for the Community Police Review Commission.

Police believe Smith was under the influence of drugs when he was arrested, but the Riverside County Coroner's Office is still awaiting the results of a toxicology test.

Police had not previously publicly disclosed Smith's death. Gonzalez's report was contained in the agenda for the commission's Jan. 25 meeting.

The commission – which is independent from the Police Department and made up of volunteers – will review the case and make recommendations to the Police Department regarding policy and procedure. The recommendations are nonbinding.

Police responded just before 7 p.m. Dec. 29 to the Stater Bros. at 2841 Mary St., near Victoria Avenue, after the store's security guard reported that a man in the parking lot was "screaming and armed with a set of nunchucks," according to Gonzalez's report.

Officers later found Smith at Washington Park, which is next to the grocery store. He was no longer armed with the nunchucks.

At first, the report said, Smith was following the officers' commands. But when the officers approached to handcuff him, "Smith became uncooperative."

"The officers used open-hand control techniques and their body weight to control Smith," the report said.

Gonzalez said in a phone interview that the tactics the officers used were not out of the ordinary.

"They just used body weight – there were no punches, no kicks, no Taser, nothing like that," Gonzalez said.

While placing Smith in handcuffs, officers found a 6.5-inch knife in a sheath on his belt.

After Smith was detained, the officers noticed that Smith was having trouble breathing and his muscles were twitching, the report said. The officers removed the handcuffs and began life-saving measures until paramedics arrived. Smith was taken to the hospital, where he died.

Afterward, detectives interviewed Smith's father, who confirmed Smith had a history of drug use said his son had been "acting strange and swinging the nunchucks" earlier in the evening.

Smith's behavior was consistent with being under the influence of drugs, said the report, which also noted he had been arrested several times in the past for drug-related crimes.

Officer Ryan Railsback, a Police Department spokesman, said officials didn't think at the time that the incident warranted a news release or other public notification.

"We don't necessarily put a press release out on everything that occurs," Railsback said. "This happened to be one of those that we didn't put a press release out on. We're definitely not hiding

anything and, not to downplay or minimize someone's death, but this is one of those things that happened so quickly."

Gonzalez, in the phone interview, added that nobody from the media inquired about Smith's death.

The death occurred as Riverside police were involved in another high-profile case in which a driver rammed two vehicles along Interstate 215, then tried to sexually assault them. Riverside detectives and a SWAT team made an arrest in that case less than eight hours after Smith's arrest.

Also at the Jan. 25 meeting, the commission will review reports on the Feb. 23, 2015 death of Steven Lewis. Police say he committed suicide after trading gunfire with officers who were responding to reports of an argument.

The meeting begins at 4:30 p.m. at Riverside City Hall, while the portion open to the public is set to start at 5:30 p.m.

Contact the writer: 951-368-9284, atadayon@scng.com, @PE_alitadayon