

Rethinking Public Safety Strategies for Cities

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Rising vaccination rates in the United States are reducing fears of COVID, but public safety concerns now loom large in the *return-to-work* calculus for many employees of urban firms. Remote work has proved viable for many. Memories of vandalism and looting in the summer of 2020 linger for both victims and for those who have not yet returned to see the extent of recovery.

Outdated images coningle with media coverage of urban gun violence, even when their locations are quite distinct. In those portions of downtown depleted of office workers, anxiety is compounded by greater visibility of homeless, addicted and mentally-ill individuals, though few present real threats to public safety. Downtowns with robust residential populations and reviving tourism are faring better. In Philadelphia, for example, by July 2021 with 60,000 residents in the core of downtown and 130,000 living in immediately adjacent neighborhoods, tourists and regional shoppers were returning in steady numbers and pedestrian volumes had rebounded to 62% of pre-pandemic levels. Fifty new retailers and restaurants had opened in the last 15 months, more than 6,200 seats at outdoor cafes and restaurants were routinely filled on evenings and the number boarded up retail premises had declined from 233 out of 1,901 in June 2020 (12%) to just 39 (2%) in June 2021.¹ Nonetheless, many office workers cited public safety in their reluctance to return. After three decades of city revival, pandemic fears of density, social unrest, resurgent quality of life challenges and the spike in shootings have rekindled America's historic ambivalence about cities.

A Washington Post-ABC News poll released just before July 4th found concern about crime at its highest in four years.² But it also highlighted a distinct gap between perception and the actual experience of respondents: 59% thought crime was an "extremely or very serious problem" in the United States, but only 17% feel the same about the area in which they live. At the same time, a sizable majority of respondents believe racial discrimination still exists, expressing hope that communities seek solutions to crime besides deployment of more police: 75% favored increased funds for economic opportunities in low-income communities and 65% supported expanded use of social workers to help police defuse situations with people having emotional problems.

Beneath this surface consensus however, pollsters found 60% of White adults believe increased police funding would reduce violent crime, compared to 50% of Hispanic adults and just 39% of

¹ <https://www.centercityphila.org/research-reports/monitoring-philadelphia-s-economic-recovery-july-2021>

² Washington Post, July 2, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/poll-crime-police-discrimination/2021/07/01/85be64b6-da79-11eb-9bbb-37c30dcf9363_story.html and https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/june-27-30-2021-washington-post-abc-news-poll/9f67b281-b289-4e67-a9e1-9515018d7e90/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2

Black adults. Even more telling: *Do you think the country is “making progress” in ensuring that people receive equal treatment regardless of their race or ethnicity, or is “losing ground”, or is it “staying the same?”* - produced striking variations: 41% of White adults chose *making progress*, 29% responded *losing ground* and 34% selected *staying the same*. Among Black adults, only 18% perceived *progress*, 30% chose *losing ground*, while 47% thought things were *staying the same*.

Demands to *defund the police* still echoed loudly as many local governments with July 1st budget deadlines debated use of American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and the host of individuals commemorated in Black Lives Matter protests has prompted a profound debate in American cities about the role of police and optimal ways to produce public safety.

What will it take to attain the optimistic middle ground proffered by the top-line findings of this poll: cities that invests in non-racist policing, economic opportunity and public safety partnerships with social service and mental health professionals?

Looking Back to Move Forward: My professional experience focuses primarily on downtowns, leading a large business improvement district.³ The partnerships developed in the last thirty years with police and social service agencies may offer some guidance on how best to restore downtowns plagued by disorder and communities challenged by gun violence. There may be lessons too, about rebuilding public confidence in appropriate roles for police.

Business improvements districts (BIDs) emerged in older U.S. cities in the mid-1980s, when the real estate boom that raised a new generation of skyscrapers and visitor destinations collided with the deteriorating quality of the public environment. The new federalism of the Reagan-Bush era brought an end to general revenue-sharing, reducing public resources for sanitation and safety. With local governments straining to meet neighborhood needs, downtown business leaders, regardless of party, got the message: we need to self-fund *clean and safe* to remain competitive with suburban malls and office parks.

In reaching out to urban police departments around 1990, BID proponents were likely to encounter innovative commanders open to new approaches. As a deputy police commissioner in Philadelphia noted in words rarely spoken in government, police were “losing market share” to private security. Continued relevance required new partnerships.⁴

³ In 1990, I helped organize and for thirty years have led the expansion of the Center City District, a business improvement district, as its operating budget has grown from \$6.5 million to \$29 million, now providing cleaning, graffiti removal, security, hospitality, promotion, planning, capital improvements and park management in the central business district of Philadelphia. www.centercityphila.org. For the last three decades, CCD has been collocated with a police station with foot and bike patrol officers. As both national and local priorities have changed, the department been led by seven different commissioners, six of whom were African American.

⁴ Thomas M Seaman, “Private Forces for Public Good, Security Management” Security Management, September 1995

During the 1960s and 1970s, policing had been incident driven, patrolling behind windows of air-conditioned cars, responding to 911 calls. Priority went to serious, part one crimes: murder, rape, arson and armed theft.⁵

By the 1980s, even with decreases in part one crimes, communities continued to tell pollsters they did not feel safe. Partially, this reflected the prevalence of guns in America and the way television and movies highlight violence. But many believed police were simply not focused on the issues that made them feel unsafe.

Based on experiences in Newark, N.J., George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson summarized findings in The Atlantic in *Broken Windows* (1982), a seminal essay that redefined “public safety” with an evocative metaphor.⁶ Just as one, untended broken window emboldens those with rocks to break the rest, ignoring petty crimes and misdemeanors conveys implicit permission to perpetrate more serious crimes.

The *quality of life* focus converged with *community policing*. With scarce resources, police should rely less on part one crimes as the organizing principal and instead ask residents and businesses: “what makes you feel unsafe?” Few thought serious crimes should be ignored. However, they preferred priority be given to day-to-day annoyances and misdemeanors: drug dealing on corners; disruptive behavior and broken beer bottles in playgrounds; smashed car windows; graffiti on storefronts and in schoolyards. They wanted visible and approachable officers on foot and on bikes.

Rather than respond only to 911 calls, police were encouraged to be proactive and diagnostic, analyzing locations that generate repeat calls for lesser infractions, often finding situations like domestic disputes, beyond the purvey of law enforcement, but which, left untended, could degenerate into violence.

This implied police become part of team efforts at dispute resolution, partnering with neighborhood and business groups, with social service and mental health agencies. This wasn't a directive for police to become social workers. But it acknowledged they are not the only safety experts and don't possess all the resources. They might be more effective as part of what today is termed a “co-delivery” service team. In Patrick Sharkey's 2018 book *Uneasy Peace*, he prescribes a shift from *warrior* to *guardian* so police become more trusted by the communities they serve.

By the early 1990s, new computer technologies enabled cumbersome pin maps to be replaced by sophisticated crime visualization graphics. This not only made it easier to diagnose patterns and respond with smarter deployment, it seemed to show when “quality of life” problems decline, more serious crime also drops. Law enforcement professionals concluded they were

⁵ Part One crimes are a FBI classification and remain the basic measure of safety in national rankings. These serious crimes always take priority when dispatching scarce police resources

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>

disrupting petty criminals before they graduated to more serious crimes. When they nabbed a subway turnstile jumper, they might also catch someone wanted for more serious offenses.

Crime waves don't require an army of criminals. Sometimes all it takes is a few serial offenders who count on being ignored. In the early 1990s, residential neighborhoods in Center City Philadelphia suffered a wave of auto break-ins that left piles of cracked glass in the gutters each morning, creating the impression that hordes of vandals swarmed the streets at night. Computer analysis of reported break-ins tracked the path, the approximate time and preference for late model Toyotas. A 1982 Toyota was strategically placed under surveillance. Within a week, two perpetrators were caught and plead guilty to an average of 45 break-ins per night. The crime wave came to a sudden stop.

Today, the backlash against *excesses* in policing has gone so far as to question *any* policing. In reaction to mass incarceration, cities are decriminalizing misdemeanors, whose decline sparked so much revival and reinvestment. Departments seeking to regain self-confidence and credibility would do well to reclaim basic tenets of community and quality of life policing before September 11, 2001 prompted a major shift to *homeland security* and the hunt for perpetrators. It helps to recall a time before community policing morphed into *stop and frisk*.

Stop and frisk guidelines authorize police to detain someone on the *suspicion* a crime has been, or may be committed by a suspect. By contrast, *quality of life* and *community policing* respond to specific, observed *behaviors* deemed problematic by local communities. *Stop and frisk* should be debated and litigated on its merits, but too many current discussions of *quality of life* policing, confuse and conflate it with *stop and frisk*, divorced from the imperatives of community engagement.⁷

Not losing the baby with the bathwater: Sharkey notes the greatest benefits from the drop in crime in the 1990s were “experienced by the most disadvantaged segments of the population.” Where crime subsided, working class and middle class residents of all races did not flee their neighborhoods, nor leave only low income families behind to fend for themselves. He cites research that shows children born in poverty in mixed-income communities have greater ability to connect with opportunity when living near other families where at least one adult is employed in a family-sustaining job. Still, this victory, notes Sharkey, came with a heavy price: police abuse and mass incarceration.⁸

James Forman Jr.'s [Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America](#) is an extraordinary corrective to today's one-dimensional discussion of mass-incarceration. He reminds us that the devastation that heroin, crack cocaine and related gun violence brought to African American neighborhoods, is what drove black elected officials and police commissioners in places like Washington D.C. to push for mandatory minimum sentences. Few sought the goal

⁷ A November 2016 NPR story, “How A Theory of Crime and Policing Was Born, And Went Terribly Wrong” contains an excellent discussion of this subject, including comments from George Kelling.

<https://www.wbur.org/npr/500104506/broken-windows-policing-and-the-origins-of-stop-and-frisk-and-how-it-went-wrong>

⁸ Sharkey, page 110

of mass incarceration; they wanted safe streets and communities. But the inability to reduce easy access to guns nationally and the failure adequately to fund drug treatment, created an unintended result. “What if, instead, D.C.’s leaders had called it a public health disaster?” Forman asks. “What if police had been trained not to arrest addicts, but to refer them directly to treatment?”⁹

Saying Isn’t Doing: In a more pragmatic vein, Patrick Sharkey writes “Now that police officers are being asked to step back from (the role of warriors), it is imperative that others step up and play a larger role in overseeing urban communities. If there are no longer warriors on the street there must be a larger supply of guardians.”¹⁰ This is the central issue for cities not entranced by the utopian, anarchist vision of self-regulating urban neighborhoods in which police are unnecessary.

Anyone who has served in local government knows, systemic change, breaking down silos and fashioning interdepartmental coordination, takes time, training and determined leadership, especially when the culture and values of social service and police departments are so vastly different. As Baltimore’s police commissioner, Michael Harrison responded to the proposal to

AMBASSADORS OF HOPE

In 2018, CCD fashioned a new approach to homelessness in Center City: the *Ambassadors of Hope*. The effort combined crisis-intervention trained (CIT) officers from Philadelphia police department’s homeless service detail, staff from Project HOME, Philadelphia’s lead non-profit service and housing provider for the homeless, and CCD homeless outreach team members, with support from the City’s Department of Behavioral Health and Office of Homeless Services. CCD funded all on-street program costs, including social service and police teams. The goal was an interdisciplinary approach to mental health and drug addiction problems that produce both homelessness and disorderly conduct and to connect at risk individuals on the street, with shelter and needed services.

Prior to the program, the approach to the unsheltered was fragmented. City-funded outreach teams, the Police Department’s homeless service detail and CCD’s homeless outreach teams worked on different schedules. All three had different geographic service areas, often with obligations that pulled them out of the core of the downtown.

The organizations aligned service areas and operating hours. They trained together and deployed in two interdisciplinary teams working five days per week. First engagement is always initiated by social service workers, though all came to appreciate the diverse knowledge, rapport and prior experience each had with unsheltered individuals. When dealing with some unstable, mentally ill individuals, outreach workers valued the presence of police.

Through frequent contacts, hundreds of homeless individuals each year have accepted help and agreed to be transported to service providers geared towards their individual needs. Project Home keeps an inventory of available sites. CCD dedicates a van to the effort. Many of those accepting services were known chronic homeless individuals, who had resisted service and placement in the past. Those who did not accept services and were observed to be in violation of the City’s Sidewalk Behavior Ordinance, were instructed by police officers on the team to cease the behavior. All complied; no citations or code violation notices were issued; no arrests were made. But, this enabled police to respond effectively to complaints from residents and businesses that prior to the partnership, they had been unable to address. The effort also motivated many in need to get the services and assistance they required.

⁹ James Forman, Locking Up Our Own, page 147

¹⁰ Starkey, Uneasy Peace, page 161.

defund police: “If you want a better sports stadium, it’s better to wait for the new one to be designed and built before knocking down the old one.”¹¹

One model of “guardians” readily available are the unarmed hospitality and safety ambassadors, trained and deployed by BIDs in scores of American cities.¹² What is remarkable is how rarely these uniformed personnel are mentioned in current discussions of redefined public safety. This is probably because these safety ambassadors, who are often hired from low and moderate income urban neighborhoods, are funded by business organizations in a time of great polarization. BIDs may not be able lead in redefining public safety in American cities, but they certainly have positive experiences to share about recruiting, training and deploying guardians.

Many BIDs have partnered with social service providers to offer outreach and transport to shelter for the homeless (see the insert about the “Ambassador of Hope” program). Other have developed extensive job training programs, creating transitional employment for formerly homeless individuals, returning citizens and other disadvantaged workers in cleaning, park and landscape maintenance programs. In short, BIDs offer models of place-based partnerships replicable in other settings.

Focusing consistently on quality of life violations does not have to result in incarceration. Rather, it means establishing consequences, collaborating with community associations, truant officers, addiction and mental health professionals, job training programs and family counselors, recognizing that social and economic problems often drive behavioral challenges.

Today, we have multiple examples of successful, community courts and drug courts across the country that blend criminal justice and social services. These venues take quality of life offenses seriously, while offering services that address the mental health or drug addiction challenges that may have driven that behavior. The courts establish real consequences for proscribed offenses, mandating treatment and community sentences that focus on restorative justice, rather than incarceration.¹³

Reducing gun violence: Nothing has been more unsettling, put more young lives at risk and generated disturbing media coverage of cities than resurgent gun violence. Concentrated in limited areas in most cities, these shootings were on the rise before the pandemic, but escalated with the greater marginalization of young people in impoverished neighborhoods as schools, recreation centers, Big Brother/Big Sister and other engagement programs closed during COVID. In some cities, gang shootings spill into downtowns.

Cities that have succeeded in curtailing shootings start with two underlying assumptions: (1) the majority of gun violence is driven by a small group of individuals who are connected to one

¹¹ “Is Police Reform Possible: Police Commissioner Perspectives” a conversation with Michael Harrison and Charles Ramsey, PAIDEA program, University of Pennsylvania, January 25, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vV0VWbOYSs>

¹² They have various names: safety ambassadors, guides or in Philadelphia’s case, Community Service Representatives. <https://www.centercityphila.org/ccd-services/public-safety/csr>

¹³ <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/community-courts-program/overview>

another, often in cycles of revenge; (2) surrounded by a code of silence and distrust of police, perpetrators are rarely reported to authorities, limiting legal consequence for the majority of shootings. Philadelphia's Gun Violence Intervention (GVI) network estimates that about 7,500 individuals in a city of 1.5 million people (0.5%) are the prime generators of 80% of gun violence.¹⁴

Here too, success is being achieved through innovative partnerships that enlist those with credibility: social workers, parents, community and religious leaders and peers, relying on law enforcement as last resort. At the core of "focused deterrence" is a process of intensive engagement that respects the challenges and limited options these young adults face, while enlisting voices who can speak credibly against violence: parents of deceased victims and those returning from prison. Individuals known to be engaged in group violence are contacted informally for meetings in their homes or some safe civic space, encouraging whatever desire they may have to disengage from violence. As one participant in Philadelphia's GVI program put it bluntly: someone who has been there can best make the case that the cycle of shooting has two likely outcomes: prison or the morgue.

Philadelphia's *Roadmap to Safer Communities* is based on a "two-handed" approach: "The violence must STOP. If it continues, every legal tool available will be used to ensure they face swift and certain consequences." This includes closer monitoring for probation violations. However, the goal is not incarceration, it's to facilitate a turn away from violence before it is too late. Individuals are simultaneously connected to job training, parenting support and GED classes to assist them in changing their lives. The City is investing heavily in education and, in targeted neighborhoods, in cleaning and greening abandoned lots, improving lighting and sealing or demolishing blighted buildings to reduce the locations where illegal guns can be stored and where illegal activity occurs.¹⁵

Like outreach to disadvantaged, addicted and mentally ill individuals, the approach is labor intensive and requires interdisciplinary teams. Even with abundant ARP resources, it is not easy to take such personalized solutions to scale and develop metrics that measure success.

The task before us: As the pandemic recedes, city leaders face the extraordinary challenge in polarized times of finding a vital middle ground: recognizing public safety is paramount to economic recovery, both in low income communities and in downtowns, but understanding it must be produced in new and different ways.¹⁶

As Sharkey noted in 2018, "changing the way police officers interact with residents in low-income communities of color is crucial to restoring legitimacy in one of the most important institutions in our society. But it is also essential to recognize the role of law enforcement has played in

¹⁴ <https://www.phila.gov/2020-08-10-group-violence-intervention-partnering-with-community-and-law-enforcement-to-stop-the-shooting/>

¹⁵ <https://www.phila.gov/media/20210414123750/RoadmapToSaferCommunitiesSpring2021.pdf>

¹⁶ In a recent Washington Post interview, Louisville Kentucky Police Chief Erika Shields offers a compelling look at how the rebuilding process can take place. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?513218-1/louisville-police-chief-protecting-public-safety>

preserving social order and reducing violence.”¹⁷ One can reject racist and illegal police actions and the over-investment in jails yet still affirm an appropriate role for well-trained police in concert with other service providers. The revival of our cities depends on it.

¹⁷ Sharkey, page 148.