Changing the Culture of Policing

Laurie Robinson

Chair, CCJ Board of Directors

After Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, MO, in 2014, President Obama asked me and Chuck Ramsey, then Philadelphia's Police Commissioner, to co-chair a White House Task Force on 21st Century Policing. I never imagined that the extraordinary public debate, anguish, and outrage over that fatal encounter could be eclipsed.

Yet here we are, six years later, a nation awash in trauma brought on by yet another tragic incident.

How do we move forward now to build trust between police and the communities they are sworn to protect? While our Task Force recommendations have been embraced by many police agencies, and while there has been substantial progress in areas like de-escalation training and use-of-force policies, much more is needed. One important first step is to think hard about how we want to use the criminal law and the power of arrest in this country – and which duties we should be assigning, or not, to the police.

According to federal data, there were some 10 million arrests in the United States in 2016, but less than 5% of these were for serious violent crimes. Instead, most involved low-level crimes like disorderly conduct, drug-abuse violations, and non-traffic offenses. An analysis of this data by the Vera Institute of Justice suggests the arrests were disproportionately applied across demographic groups, a practice that affected Black people, in particular. And beyond the enormous fiscal costs of such arrests, they take a profound human toll on people ensnared by the system.

Those pushing to defund the police rightly question our heavy reliance on law enforcement to respond to the full spectrum of community troubles. Why are police handling issues of homelessness, addiction, and mental illness? The answer is that in most jurisdictions, homeless services, substance abuse treatment, and mental health care are inadequate – and there's no one else to do it at 3:00 in the morning. Changing the paradigm won't be solved by a simple shift in budget line items. And, as with most things at the nuts-and-bolts level of government, the devil will be in the details.

We also must change the culture of policing from one based on a warrior model to one rooted in the notion that officers are guardians of their communities. This was a central tenet of our White House Task Force report. Culture change will have to begin with recruitment to create a police force that embraces the guardian mindset and looks like the community it serves. As our report noted, genuine diversity in departments – diversity of not just race and gender, but also of identity, experience, and background – can "build greater trust and legitimacy with all segments of the population."

None of this is easy, and the killing of George Floyd has badly eroded the progress made by reform-minded police leaders since Ferguson. But these are urgent challenges that every community must confront. Doing so is essential – not just to rebuild trust in law enforcement, but to restore faith in our democracy.

It's Time to Speak Out, but Also Listen

Khalil A. Cumberbatch

CCJ Senior Fellow

I will never forget my first interaction with police. It happened when I was a young kid, about 11 years old, but the memory is stuck in my mind to this day.

One summer evening, I was sitting on the front steps of my aunt's house in South Side Jamaica, Queens, a neighborhood that had been over-policed for decades, when suddenly an unmarked car screeched to a halt in front of me. Two plain-clothed detectives jumped out and said, "Don't f***ing move."

Terrified, I complied. But before I knew it my friends and I were grabbed by our shirts, thrown to the ground and against a fence, and searched. I was stunned that it was happening to me, but I was not stunned that it was happening. That's because I'd seen police treat older boys and men in my neighborhood the same way many times. Paralyzed by fear, I heard a series of questions: What's your name? Where do you live? Got any weapons on you? I gave the only answers my young mind could muster.

That interaction set in stone my boyhood view of law enforcement: police were hostile

occupiers, and as a young person of color, there was nothing I could do to change what they thought of me. In my neighborhood, we did not grow up learning to trust or interact with those in blue uniforms and squad cars. There were simply too many troubling episodes eroding the possibility of respect.

As an adult and advocate for criminal justice reform, my relationship with law enforcement has been different. During my policy travels, I have worked with policing organizations to create and implement reforms that impact communities just like South Side. As part of those efforts, I have sat shoulder to shoulder at conference tables with police chiefs and other top brass, hammering out solutions. It's fulfilling work, but fraught with anxiety as well. To this day, when I see law enforcement, I am transported back to my aunt's front steps, to those chilling moments of fear. I have worked hard to manage and mask it, but it is still there.

Despite my discomfort, I won't stop sitting at those tables. For one thing, I owe it to all communities like South Side to represent them. But I also believe wholeheartedly in the collaborative process. If I demand to be heard, I must also listen, even when I disagree with the message or the messenger. We cannot heal the tensions between communities and police unless both sides engage in a meaningful and sustained conversation.

The murders of unarmed people of color at the hands of law enforcement have sparked an unprecedented and desperately needed national dialog around policing. That's gratifying, but it's only a start. Making effective short- and long-term improvements that represent the best interests of communities will be hard work, requiring us to leave behind the business-as-usual approach and fight for equity, fairness, and lasting change. We can do it. We're who we've been waiting for.

Real Chance for Change

Adam Gelb

CCJ President and CEO

Over the past quarter century, countless initiatives and measures have sought to reduce police violence and improve police-community relations: psychological screening of recruits,

enhanced training and supervision, community policing programs and liaison officers, police athletic leagues, civilian oversight boards, body-worn cameras, and much, much more. Yet the killings continue, with men of color the disproportionate victims. So far, the most potent tool seems to be a civilian witness bearing a smartphone.

There have been angry but peaceful protests before. Looting too. But this time feels different, in scale and intensity. The convergence of the coronavirus pandemic and the death of George Floyd has pried off the sutures binding America's deepest wound – and has rightly elevated racial justice to the forefront of the nation's conscience.

Now more than ever, **we carry a collective and urgent responsibility to really listen to people with expertise**, particularly those whose lives and communities have been affected most by the machinery of the system. We must also consult research, including this new comprehensive volume and these econometric studies that reveal some promising strategies and challenge some long-held assumptions.

The Council on Criminal Justice's mission is to advance understanding of the criminal justice policy choices facing the nation and build consensus for solutions that enhance safety and justice for all. The Council will raise the quality and diversity of the conversation, and ultimately elevate the impact of reforms that will flow from this year's catastrophic events. Working together, we will make progress toward a society and a system that is fair and just, regardless of the color of your uniform or the color of your skin.

Law Enforcement Must Step Up

Thaddeus Johnson, Ph.D.

CCJ Senior Fellow

As a black man who spent 10 years on the police force in a predominantly black city, I've walked in both sets of shoes. I understand how challenging policing is, so when officer-involved shootings occur, I tend to give the uniformed person the benefit of the doubt. But Minneapolis was different. There was no talking around it. Derek Chauvin and his partners had to be fired, and maybe even convicted.

The tide of protest and violence surging through our nation's streets isn't about one black man dying beneath the knee of one white man. It's about trust in our government. It's about the fact that everyone is created equal. It's about decades upon decades of pain and injustice. **George Floyd's murder represents a tipping point, because the tinderbox had long been lit.** With frustrations already brewing given the tanking economy, the pandemic, and the Ahmaud Arbery killing, this "perfect storm" was inevitable.

Swift and decisive action is needed if police and government leaders hope to regain the trust of our communities. Here's one example – the six officers facing charges for using excessive force during protests in Atlanta, where I live. Is it fair? Do I think that's the right decision? I'm not sure. It's possible these officers might have had one bad moment, one misjudgment. But we must get something done now. We can't get this wrong. The future of our nation depends on it.

Police officers are not to blame for all of society's ills, but if we can't trust them to keep us safe, where do we turn? It's up to law enforcement to regain our confidence. Given the depth of the damage, officers – even those who have done no wrong – must show that they're willing to seek forgiveness, to make things right. Much like a cheating spouse, they need to prove that they're worthy of another chance.

There are no simple answers here, far from it. **But I do know that law enforcement must adopt a zero-tolerance approach to the mistreatment of citizens.** I also know that police must fundamentally change their mission from that of warrior to guardian, and move beyond traditional metrics like arrests, citations, and seizures. We can recruit the best officers and provide them with world-class resources, but if the training and rewards structure continue to perpetuate old cultural traditions, and if institutional barriers continue to shield bad officers from accountability, then our efforts to reform policing in America will fail.

It's naïve to believe that police culture will change overnight. And yet of all the times in my life, I feel the most hopeful now. This is a watershed moment in our nation's history. Black people are fed up. White people are fed up. Our leaders are fed up. Good officers are fed up. The world is finally fed up! Change is on the horizon.

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