

Boston's Police Solution

By Orlando Patterson
and Christopher Winship

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. As the current furor over New York City policing has shown, African-Americans today face few dilemmas more painful than the tension between the need to safeguard their neighborhoods and the need to safeguard their rights.

All too often, however, both critics and defenders of the police have portrayed this tension as a stark choice, in which lowering urban crime rates necessarily requires the kind of policing that makes civil rights advocates and community leaders cry foul. Not so. Consider the case of Boston, where the homicide rate has fallen 77 percent since 1990 — 5 percentage points more than in New York.

Boston began its successful attack on crime, in the late 1980's and early 1990's, by employing the tactics adopted later in New York City under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. And as in New York, while crime went down, relations between the police and African-Americans worsened.

In 1989, the high-profile murder of Carol Stuart — a pregnant white woman — created a wave of terror, as the Boston police descended on inner-city neighborhoods in their search for a "young black male" suspect. Mrs. Stuart turned out to have been murdered by her own husband, who had fabricated the description. The police tactics in the Stuart investigation, along with the stop-and-frisk policies of the Citywide Anti-Crime Unit here, provoked such outrage among African-Americans that the city was forced to disband the unit and change its strategy.

Boston's new approach to law enforcement has involved collaboration between the police and probation de-

partments, a focus on getting guns off the streets and, most important, a close partnership with community leaders, especially a group of black clergymen known as the Ten-Point Coalition. This partnership is key in explaining why Boston has reduced crime even more than New York, and with much less ethnic friction.

The partnership rests on four principles. First, inner-city violence should be dealt with primarily as a crime problem, rather than as a symptom of poverty, poor schools, broken families and the like. Second, there is agreement that only a small percentage of youths are at the core of the problem and that the community can help to identify them. Third, the community leadership should have an informal say in the decision

How New York might defuse current tensions.

to arrest certain teen-agers (for instance, in cases of first offenses or when there are extenuating circumstances). Finally, if the police behave badly, they bear the full brunt of responsibility.

These principles were tested after the murder of Paul McLaughlin, a white state prosecutor, in May 1995. Mr. McLaughlin had vigorously prosecuted gang members, and a young African-American man was seen fleeing the murder scene.

But the Boston police made it clear, that they would not repeat the rights violations that had followed the Stuart murder. And the Ten-Point ministers and other community leaders made it clear that they, in turn, would fully support an aggressive but fair investigation. As one minister stated, "This is a time for the city of Boston to come together and make it clear that we will not be held hostage to either perpetrators of violence or by those who would exploit the fear of violence to promote more racial division."

Early last year, after a carefully focused investigation, a gang member, Jeffrey Bly, was arrested and indicted in Mr. McLaughlin's murder. African-American leaders joined in praising the police.

By focusing their efforts, the Boston police have found it unnecessary to undertake the huge increase in the size of the force that New York did, yet they have achieved even better results. For a remarkable 29-month period, until January 1998, Boston had not a single teen-age homicide victim. (Since then there have been only four.)

There have still been occasional police excesses, to be sure. But there are fewer of them each year, and there has been no incident to compare with the Amadou Diallo or Abner Louima cases. The Boston officers responsible for violations have been promptly and severely punished.

Given Boston's history of less-than-perfect race relations — and the deep distrust rooted in the school desegregation battles of the 1970's — its recent success is especially telling.

Boston's story demonstrates that trust between the police and the African-American community can be restored and enhanced — even in the wake of a crisis. It shows that this cooperation between police and community leaders can advance the shared goal of crime reduction. And most important, it helps prove that there is no inherent conflict between effective police work and respect for the freedom and dignity of citizens. □

Maureen Dowd is on vacation.

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