



Angels in Blue

The Virtues of Foot Patrol

Peter Moskos

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Baltimore's population decline seems to have finally leveled off, sticking at around 630,000, down from almost 950,000 in 1950. Crime has leveled off, too, notwithstanding the fact that the city is on its sixth police commissioner since 1999. There were 234 homicides in 2008, the lowest number in decades and a big drop from 2007. Three police officers have been killed over the past six years; three too many, but better than the seven killed between 2000 and 2002.

Baltimore has long been a tough place for police, as the cunning verisimilitude of HBO's

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five-season television series *The Wire* so skillfully showed. Despite improvements, it still is a tough place. And few places are tougher today than Baltimore's Eastern District.

The Eastern District, which for many years has looked like a cross between bombed out Dresden and a set from *Trainspotting*, is emptier than ever. The intersection of Wolfe and Eager Streets is no longer a drug corner, true, but not because of police work. After years of talk and planning, bulldozers and Johns Hopkins University money did what generations of police, myself included, could not. The grand plan for the New East Side involves 88 acres of nearly fifty city blocks. Whether the rebuilt area will succeed—and whether any benefits will extend beyond the immediate area to the rest of Baltimore—remains to be seen. But only the most cynical of pessimists can fail to see some promise in what is by any measure a huge investment.

If the New East Side project succeeds, it will do so in part through smarter police work. Responsible and respectable people won't move into a neighborhood filled with violent crime and flashing blue light cameras. Only the police department thinks that flashing blue lights make people feel safer. On the contrary, they are signs that you're in a dangerous neighborhood. Despite the hard work and dedication of most police officers, we know that policing as usual in the Eastern District doesn't work. So what to do? Take the money spent on cameras and observers and use it to reintroduce a classic and effective form of policing: foot patrol.¹

Foot patrol used to define policing, and even today a certain romantic stereotype of the espantoon-twirling Baltimore beat cop persists. (The espantoon is a classic hand-carved Baltimore nightstick fitted with a leather strap on the end for twirling satisfaction. I tried to master the twirling technique when the sticks were re-authorized in 2000, but after busting my own knee cap a few too many times I decided to stick with my trusted straight baton.) But the pattern today is that when police start driving, they never "walk foot" again. That represents a loss for community and police alike. Foot patrol officers knew their neighborhood because in a real sense they were part of it. Beat cops watched people grow up, get jobs, or get in trouble. They learned to see and anticipate potential crimes. They could tell which people and vehicles did not fit in the neighborhood and focus attention accordingly. They could tell the difference between a group of residents enjoying themselves on a stoop and a group about to cause trouble. That's often a subtle difference, but one that is immediately apparent to anybody walking by, especially a local. From inside a car, especially a police car occupied by outsiders, that kind of disorder is invisible.

Beyond a few token patrols, police chiefs say foot patrol is impossible nowadays because there simply aren't enough officers to go around. But there aren't fewer police officers than there used to be; they're just assigned differently—riding in cars and chasing the radio. The reason police officers resist foot patrol is simple: They don't like it. In a car culture, cars are status. Walking is bottom-of-the-barrel duty, and tough work—when it rains you get wet. As a rule, about half of all

police in cities are assigned to patrol, though not all of those are actually on the street. Patrol should be increased to two-thirds or three-fourths of the department, and about three-fourths of those on patrol should be on foot or bike. The remaining cars can provide backup, focus on very quick-response contingencies outside of foot-patrolled core areas, and enforce traffic laws.

Hard as it may be to imagine, foot patrol was once cutting-edge best practice for police work. Indeed, when Sir Robert Peel established the first police force in London in 1829, he invented foot patrol along with it. The idea that the government would pay uniformed men to patrol full-time for the purpose of crime prevention and criminal apprehension was radical. Peel wanted "to teach people that liberty does not consist in having your house robbed by organized gangs of thieves, and in leaving the principal streets of London in the nightly possession of drunken women and vagabonds." He summed up this philosophy in what is known today as Peel's Nine Principles of Policing, which remain notable both for their ideals and—especially when compared to contemporary police General Orders and Patrol Guides—their brevity.

Following the lead of Robert Peel and his London "Bobbies", the City of New York established America's first police department in 1845. Within ten years, most other large cities, Baltimore included, followed suit. What police actually did in the early days isn't well known, but the inimitable H. L. Mencken's reminiscing sets the scene:

In those days that pestilence of Service which torments the American people today was just getting under way, and many of the multifarious duties now carried out by social workers, statisticians, truant officer, visiting nurses, psychologists, and the vast rabble of inspectors, smellers, spies and bogus experts of a

¹Bicycle patrol can also be seen as a form of foot patrol. In many ways bicycles provide the best of car patrol and foot patrol. Officers on bikes benefit from all the stealth, awareness and public interaction of foot patrol but have a speed, especially in heavy traffic over short distances, that can compete with cars.

hundred different faculties either fell to the police or were not discharged at all. An ordinary flatfoot in a quiet residential section had his hands full. In a single day he might have to put out a couple of kitchen fires, arrange for the removal of a dead mule, guard a poor epileptic having a fit on the sidewalk, catch a runaway horse, settle a combat with table knives between husband and wife, shoot a cat for killing pigeons, rescue a dog or a baby from a sewer, bawl out a white-wings [sailor] for spilling garbage, keep order on the sidewalk at two or three funerals, and flog a half a dozen bad boys for throwing horse-apples at a blind man.²

After the 1877 invention of the call box, day-to-day patrol changed little until after World War II and the introduction of the two-way. Early police radios were so large and power hungry that they could only be operated from cars. But the brass loved radio cars because they could keep tabs on patrol officers, and patrol officers loved the comfort and prestige of the radio car. By the time portable two-way radios became standard and 911 systems were introduced in the 1970s, cars had redefined the core concept of police patrol.

This has been wonderful for police creature comfort, but it has not been so good for crime control. On foot, a policeman can get far closer to criminals without being detected. When I walked in Baltimore, drug dealers were shocked to see me.³ “Five-oh”, lookouts would sing, and then add with surprise, “*on foot!*” I remember a woman leaving her house before dawn, taking one look at me and a partner, and, practically overcome with emotion, exclaiming, “God bless you two, angels in blue! Thanks for all your work! It’s so good to see you out here.”

Currently America’s largest foot patrol program is Operation Impact in New York City. Begun in 2003, the program has about 1,800 rookie officers currently walking the beat. It seems, at least at first glance, like a throwback to the old days of foot patrol. But it’s not quite.

Operation Impact is organized around small areas with the highest levels of violent

crime—so-called Impact Zones. In these areas, pairs of officers are assigned to walk foot. Two shifts work from noon to 4 a.m. Some of the posts are as small as three linear blocks. These officers remain on foot until another class of academy graduates comes through to push them out, a process that can take anywhere from six months to a few years.

If the goal of police is to prevent crime, as it should be, Operation Impact qualifies as a success. New York Precincts with Impact Zones saw homicides drop 24 percent faster than the city overall.⁴ But the Impact Zone concept has a serious drawback, and the Baltimore police who will one day have responsibility for the new Eastern District need to understand both sides.

While having many officers on the street does indeed deter crime, many Impact Zone residents—young men in particular—don’t like it. Their reasons become clear once you understand the CompStat program. Since CompStat began in 1994, numbers have ruled the NYPD roost. Sergeants, lieutenants, captains and inspectors feel intense pressure to produce ever better “stats.” The young foot officers right out of the academy are encouraged to cite and collar people and crack down on everything. They write tickets to meet “productivity” quotas, such as twenty citations or one arrest per month. One ticket per shift isn’t a particularly onerous quota,

²Mencken, *The Vintage Mencken* (Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 28–9.

³I should explain that Baltimore patrol officers generally did not walk foot in the middle of the night. Officers on foot were, and remain, technically “out of service” because they are not near their car and can’t immediately respond to calls for service. But I and two others in the squad picked the slowest hour, generally 4 to 5 a.m., to walk around a one-mile square four times. Our motivations were selfish—we wanted the exercise—but the effect was unquestionable: We couldn’t help but be seen, and that alone was a deterrent to crime.

⁴Dennis C. Smith and Robert Purtell, “An Empirical Assessment of NYPD’s Operation Impact: A Target Zone Crime Reduction Strategy”, A Report to the Commissioner (June 2007).

but for residents in Impact Zones the sheer number of officers needing somebody to cite becomes overbearing. Of course, hard-core criminals need to be locked up and opportunistic criminals need to be deterred, but harassing and ticketing *non-criminals* is neither fair nor helpful. In the old foot-patrol culture, as often as not, average citizens were inclined to give police information. In a CompStat world, average citizens resent what they see as police harassment to the point that they

want nothing to do with cops or any part of the criminal justice system. That makes a huge difference in the effectiveness of foot patrol—no less, one could say, than information asymmetries do in counterinsurgency military operations.⁵

Of course reducing crime and violence needs to be the number one goal of policing,

⁵See Mark Kimmitt, “War Games”, *The American Interest* (July/August 2009).

Peel’s Nine Principles of Policing

1. To prevent crime and disorder, as an alternative to their repression by military force and by severity of legal punishment.
2. To recognize that the power of the police to fulfill their functions and duties is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions and behaviour, and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect.
3. To recognize that to secure and maintain the respect and approval of the public means also the securing of willing cooperation of the public in the task of securing observance of laws.
4. To recognize that the extent to which the cooperation of the public can be secured diminishes, proportionately, the necessity of the use of physical force and compulsion for achieving police objectives.
5. To seek and to preserve public favour, not by pandering to public opinion, but by constantly demonstrating absolutely impartial service to law, in complete independence of policy, and without regard to the justice or injustice of the substance of individual laws; by ready offering of individual service and friendship to all members of the public without regard to their wealth or social standing; by ready exercise of courtesy and friendly good humour; and by ready offering of individual sacrifice in protecting and preserving life.
6. To use physical force only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient to obtain public cooperation to an extent necessary to secure observance of law or to restore order; and to use only the minimum degree of physical force which is necessary on any particular occasion for achieving a police objective.
7. To maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and that the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen, in the interests of community welfare and existence.
8. To recognize the need for strict adherence to police-executive functions, and to refrain from even seeming to usurp the powers of the judiciary of avenging individuals or the state, and of authoritatively judging guilt and punishing the guilty.
9. To recognize that the test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, and not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.



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but public satisfaction needs to rank high as well because it's integral to establishing a context that enables police to be effective. In New York's high-crime neighborhoods, community relations don't rank at all. "They don't like us", one foot patrol NYPD officer said, "Why should they? . . . [But] they don't even respect us. Police in RMPs [cars, officially Radio Motor Patrol] get more respect. I've seen it. This hat [pointing to his clean, shiny and properly affixed hat] says rookie!" Another officer said, "I'd say 80 percent of my friends from the academy class are from the Island [not from the city]. We're just hired guns. Mercenaries." To locals, these guys are no angels in blue.

The NYPD version of foot patrol loses something else from the traditional beat cop, too. The rotation cycles are too short, so police never get to really know the community. New York City residents generally avoid eye contact or a greeting, even a polite head nod of acknowledgment, with Impact officers because there really isn't much point for police and residents to get to know one another. "I can't wait to get out of here", an Impact officer said while watching a drunk woman berate a store owner through a Plexiglas night-window, "I hate everybody in this neighborhood." For many residents, the feeling is mutual, and the result is like nothing H.L. Mencken would have recognized.

For all these reasons, the status of walking foot is much too low to be maximally effective. I saw this for myself one night when I

joined NYPD Impact officers on patrol. These rookie cops were eager to police and performed their job well, but they made no bones about wanting to be elsewhere. "Would *you* want to be here?" one asked me. (Actually, I did. After nearly eight years, I was excited to strap on my bulletproof vest and lace up my boots. But my enthusiasm was little shared by those pounding the pavement.) The fact that only rookies are assigned Impact foot patrol defines and confirms its low organizational status. Com-

ing straight from the academy, these rookies never were in cars, but they know that's where they need to be for "real" police work, zooming around, lights and siren switched on, chasing the bad guys.

Arrest and citation quotas in turn exacerbate the low-status problem. Along with contributing to community hatred of police, they're an insult to police professionalism. In a quota-driven system, police come to see all citizens, even the good ones, as potential stats. (For instance, suspects are seen in terms of hours, like "four hours", for their arrest-related overtime-pay potential.) But stopping crime is what matters, not some arbitrary number of arrests or citations. A good officer in an active district doesn't have to try very hard to produce stats. Using quotas to force "production" from bad or lazy officers results in bad citations and arrests. While the police world sees every stat as a good stat, in the real world a bad citation or arrest is much worse than none at all. Just witness the recent controversy over the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Police know the difference between "good" and "bullshit" stats. One ranking NYPD officer told me he neither asks for nor approves of bullshit citations from those under him. He gave an example of a public park closed at night: "If the park were used by people to party—smoking and drinking—we would encourage citations. But if people were just using the park as a shortcut coming home from work, I wouldn't want officers citing those

people. That's an excellent use of discretion." He's right, and an officer under him acknowledged his superior's ideals. But he added, "I'd love it if I always had enough good C's [criminal citations], but I need numbers. And if I don't have enough stats and CompStat is coming up, I don't care if they're bullshit. I'll take whatever the f— I can get!" In a world where "better stats" and "more stats" are synonymous, the tail has long since started to wag the dog.

When stats become more important than the reality they're supposed to represent, bad things happen. In recent years, talk of juking the stats has become much more common in the NYPD. Felony thefts become misdemeanors if the stolen property—say a laptop computer—is priced at less than \$1,000. Or a sergeant may look at a felony assault report and reclassify the event a misdemeanor. The problem with playing fast and loose with the numbers is that once you start, you can't stop. You need to keep juking just to stay even. And no matter how much the real crime rate drops (as indeed it has in New York City), systematic dishonesty in crime accounting runs counter to basic integrity. It eventually ends in scandal.

Impact's success at reducing crime shows the potential for foot patrol, but it clearly hasn't changed the car-based culture of policing. A long-term commitment is needed for foot patrol to once again become the dominant form of real police work, for it to be desirable as opposed to merely tolerated. One way to do that is through what I call "policing green."

"Policing green" means giving foot patrol officers the gas money they would have burned in a squad car. It may sound like petty

change, but just as overtime pay drives discretionary arrests, extra pocket money would change the very culture of patrol. Officers need to *want* to walk foot, and more money is a way to make them want it. Only with willing officers does foot patrol bring the best possible benefits.

Policing green gives officers a choice each and every shift: Grab the keys to the police car, or put the keys away and pocket some extra pay. Each squad car costs the city anywhere from \$20 to \$50 per shift in fuel. Rather than send that money to oil companies and hostile petro-states, let's send it to hard-working police officers. Most police officers I've asked would gladly walk their beat (at least when the weather is good) if they could pocket the gas money. An extra \$25 per shift adds up to more than \$5,000 a year, about a 15 percent raise for new officers. Departments would save money in reduced vehicle maintenance and repairs. The public would get the foot officers they need. Hell, policing green is even good for the environment.

If we want more foot patrol, we can have it. But it requires scaling back car patrols and specialized units. Response time requirements would need to be reshaped, and both quotas and arrest numbers would need to be de-emphasized. What matters is crime prevention, no matter how hard prevention is to quantify. Of course policing green will bring problems and complications that need to be worked out. But police can solve these issues from the bottom up. Patrol officers have a lot more knowledge, common sense and wisdom than higher-ups in the police department often give them credit for. Most police are smart and filled with good ideas. It's time we listened to them. 🚔

For it is mutual trust, even more than mutual interest, that holds human associations together. Our friends seldom profit us but they make us feel safe.

—H. L. Mencken