

Feet on the Street

WHAT more can the NYPD do to fight crime?

At 4 a.m. the other Sunday, a group of five moved their party to a pick-up truck across from my apartment on a usually quiet Queens street. They were, as drunks often are, loud.

I yelled at them to quiet down, but after an hour, I'd enough and called police. Ninety minutes later, bottles still in hand, the group dispersed. By that time they had urinated on the sidewalk numerous times, thrown a few bricks, and calmly talked to the police twice in response to my six calls and 90 minutes for police to "handle" a call for drinking and disorderly people on a slow Sunday morning? Because police are out of touch with the areas they are meant to serve. There's no cops walking the beat.

How did this come to be? In the 1950s and 1960s, some thought that technology and social progress could eliminate crime. Crime prevention was delegated to sociologists and psychologists. Police, they claimed, can't prevent crime any more than they can improve local schools, eliminate poverty, or end racism.

What happened? Crime skyrocketed. Police were moved from the street to patrol cars to handle the demand from the newly established 911 system. Police efficiency was judged by response time and numbers of arrests (rather than the rising crime rate).

Car patrol now consumes most police manpower — but it doesn't prevent crime. Rapid response works fine for fires and heart attacks, but leads to an arrest in less than 3 percent of serious crimes.

PETER MOSKOS

University of Delaware professor Carl Kloockars notes, "It makes about as much sense to have police patrol routinely in cars to fight crime as it does to have firemen patrol routinely in firetrucks to fight fire."

When the homicide rate in New York City plummeted by two-thirds in the 1990s, police played a major role with a new but decidedly old-fashioned philosophy: quality-of-life issues matter and good policing can prevent crime.

Paramilitary units shouldn't take all the credit. Eight times out of 10, SWAT-like units would be more effective if they simply walked the beat in high-crime neighborhoods.

The difference between a group of people quietly hanging out and the same group of people being disorderly or even threatening is too subtle for a police officer to determine if isolated in a squad car. Yet any pedestrian or foot officer can immediately tell when something is amiss.

Cops on foot pushed dealers off corners and back indoors. Less public drug dealing meant fewer drug dealers carrying guns and getting killed.

More police on the street meant less fear and increased quality of life.

Today, police on foot are everywhere in Midtown and lower Manhattan. Not coincidentally, these areas are safe. But New York City, safe as it is, is still more dangerous than London, Paris, even Belfast. In dangerous residential areas — precisely where foot patrol is needed most — police are, ironically, "too busy" to walk the beat.

When I walked the beat, often at 4 a.m. in Baltimore's worst neighborhood, I learned more about the area in one hour than I did in seven hours in a car. Drug dealers were shocked when their lookouts called me out, "Five-oh, on foot." And it was nice to hear the joy in one woman's voice as she left her house before dawn to go to work, "God bless you two, like angels in blue. Thanks for all your work! It's so good to see you out here."

In cars, you see mostly scowls. But patrol officers, myself included, like the comfort and prestige of the police car.

It's hot in the summer. I was no supercop. The choice between walking in the sun wearing a bullet-proof vest and sitting in an air-conditioning car with radio and coffee is an easy one.

But there are some jobs that demand being in the elements. Police patrol should be one of them.

Elevating foot patrol within the police department would be a major organizational change, but it would not be difficult. Let rookies drive marked cars to learn the ropes, write tickets, and back-up veteran foot officers. Promote officers to foot patrol and give them responsibility for a beat. Let experienced officers rise in rank and salary while they remain in patrol. Stop using foot patrol as punishment.

More foot patrol would mean fewer police in cars and yes, response times would increase. But police cars and rapid response do not make our streets safer.

Feet on the street. Nothing else will work. Peter Moskos, a PhD candidate in Sociology at Harvard University, was a Baltimore City police officer.