

The right way for cops to retake streets

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Since the riots in Baltimore on April 27, the day of Freddie Gray's funeral, shootings and killings in that city have doubled. Large increases in violence have been seen in other cities as well. It's reasonable to see these increases as a response to less aggressive policing.

Baltimore police were already stretched too thin. Hundreds of positions were vacant before the riots, and patrol number were further diminished by the 100-plus officers, 5% of the total force, who were injured during the mayhem.

Compounding matters, according to police officers I've spoken to, is that calls that were previously handled by one cop working alone now require three or four officers, because crowds, sometimes angry, surround officers every time they deal with a member of the public.

There is an understandable hesitance of officers to engage in the legal hands-on messiness of day-to-day policing. In this newly tense and charged community, police are losing the ability to engage in forms of proactive police work -- clearing drug corners, frisking suspects, and making discretionary arrests -- that deter some criminals from carrying illegal guns.

If police were actually the bad guys, agents of repression, then this would be good news. But the result of less policing appears to have been more shootings and sometimes killing.

And much as we would like to think otherwise, policing cannot always be conducted with a smile and a wave. Criminals intent on harming others will not always desist because they were asked politely. So we need an honest debate about police and crime prevention that moves beyond the narrative that police are the greatest threat to black lives.

And here's a good place to start: Let's reconsider the very nature of police patrol, with the goal being more effective crime prevention and less repressive policing.

Generally, in any large city, half the police department is assigned to "patrol." This is the entry-level position, the cops who are sent when a citizen picks up the phone and dials 911. This call-and-response may sound good in theory, but it is purely reactive in nature. It doesn't prevent crime and it sucks up police resources.

These calls for service would often be better addressed by doctors, social workers, teachers and parents. Many people who call 911 do need help, but it's not help that a very young police officer barely out of high school -- armed and with the power of arrest -- can provide.

Over the past 40 years, with the advent of call-and-response policing, the mentality of policing changed. Consider the portrayal in the 1980s TV show "Hill Street Blues" (it's pop culture, but it contains truth): The first sergeant, played by Michael Conrad, finished roll call

with the sage advice: "Let's be careful out there." After his death, the new sergeant was played by Robert Prosky. His motto? "Let's do it to them before they do it to us."

There are benefits to old-fashioned beat policing that we need to reclaim, but we can't as long as most police resources are controlled by civilian dispatchers, officers have too little discretion, and the war on drugs dominates urban policing by criminalizing too many people.

For a cop bouncing from call to call constantly dealing with criminals or people who have lost control of their lives, it's too easy to believe that nobody in the area is in control. From the window of a patrol car, every face on the corner starts looking the same. By walking on foot and engaging with the noncriminal public, police officers, especially those without any prior knowledge of the area they police, could begin to understand both how communities function and how they fail.

Like any professional organization, the police department needs to treat its employees with respect and professionalism. Patrol, foot patrol in particular, needs to be valued. Instead, the police organization rewards cops for arrests. This encourages a mentality that arrests are good, and the more the better.

Arrests, necessary though they can be, should be seen as a sign of failure, a crime not prevented. A quiet night walking the beat is actually a job well done, but police don't see it that way. Walking the beat is too often a form of punishment.

Police in urban America need to be freed from the Sisyphean burden of service on demand, incident- and phone-based policing, and return to what could be called officer-based policing. This means the end of bean-counting; no more judging officers through "efficiency" or "production." Summonses, arrests and quick response may sometimes be necessary, but they shouldn't define good policing.

Only with discretion and control over their own resources can officers have the time to get out of their car, gain local knowledge, engage in problem solving, and better distinguish criminals from noncriminals. Today, when we need the best officers patrolling the most dangerous neighborhoods, one finds the least experienced.

An experienced officer is better at sorting through the combination of emotions, alcohol, drugs, anger and plain human stupidity that fuels so many local conflicts. But once a good officer is promoted or transferred out of patrol -- and it's worth noting that no police officer is ever promoted to patrol -- he or she has little if any contact with the public.

It's too easy to tell police what we don't want. But any system of good policing involves a certain level of coercion and force. Policing can't and shouldn't always be pretty or hands-off. If it were, we wouldn't need police. What is lacking in the current debate is firm leadership, support and a willingness to let officers know what we actually want them to do.