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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

How Community Policing Can Work

By CHARLIE BECK and CONNIE RICE AUG. 12, 2016

Los Angeles — After the recent murders of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, La., and the devastating videos of the shooting deaths of black men like Alton B. Sterling and Philando Castile, the future of police-community relations in cities all over America hangs in the balance. But even as the country is still reeling from these traumas, this is no time for despair.

Since the urban unrest of the 1960s, a series of post-riot audits — from the McCone, Kerner and Christopher Commissions to President Obama’s Task Force on 21st-Century Policing (on which one of us serves) — have prescribed the same remedy for police-community conflict: move to guardian policing, overcome bias and replace the “spiral of despair” in poor neighborhoods with opportunity and justice.

We have yet to deliver on many of these — despite the regular reminders we get. Just this week, the report on Baltimore commissioned by the Department of Justice after the 2015 death in police custody of Freddie Gray prescribed a transformation of police culture and practice supervised by the courts, much like the “consent decree” imposed on the Los Angeles Police Department in 2001. At that time, the city faced a total breakdown of public-police trust; since then, we have come a long way, but reform is still a work in progress.

One of us is the chief of the Los Angeles Police Department. The other is a civil rights lawyer who, for years, sued that department. It's safe to say that the Hatfields and the McCoys shared more affection than we did. But in 2002 we joined forces with: Mayor James Hahn; a Federal District Court judge, Gary A. Feess; the chief of police at the time, William J. Bratton; and an army of reformers in an urgent quest for a police culture that no longer prompted race riots or judicial supervision.

Call it guardian policing, trust policing, problem-solving policing, relationship-based policing, community policing or partnership policing. The many names share one vision: humane, compassionate, culturally fluent cops who have a mind-set of respect, do not fear black men, and serve long enough to know residents' names, speak their languages and help improve the neighborhood.

We believed this approach could reduce bad policing, bolster law enforcement and increase public safety. We went out to prove it, and 15 years later, we think we have.

Come to Watts and East Los Angeles and you will see the Police Department's Community Safety Partnership unit, which operates in seven of the city's most violent public housing projects. Here, officers call out residents' names in greeting and patrol on foot with gang intervention specialists. The officers earn trust by participating in a range of neighborhood activities — everything from buying bifocals for older people to helping start a farmers' market and sports leagues for kids. The unit's officers are not promoted for making arrests, but for demonstrating how they diverted a kid from jail and increased trust.

Above all, they do not view residents of high-crime areas as potential suspects or deportees but as partners in public safety. In white neighborhoods, they are trained to not see black men as out-of-place threats. Many other officers, of course, strive for these goals, though they often do so without the special training and extra resources of this program.

But the police are only half the equation. This partnership demands changes from the community that may be even harder to deliver. In Los Angeles, grieving parents had to agree to join cops who had jailed or killed their children during the wars on drugs and gangs. The Community Safety Partnership began with an officer's

apology for past police transgressions; after that, Watts and East Los Angeles leaders agreed to work with the Police Department in the pilot program.

The benefits are manifest. In its first year, the partnership unit posted the department's steepest crime reductions and has sustained those drops ever since. For nearly two years after the start of the program, three housing projects that had once suffered several killings a year did not have a single murder. And in Watts, there have been no shootings by the partnership officers in over five years.

The true test of guardian policing, however, is during a crisis. This is when the reservoir of trust saves lives — as it did three weeks ago, after a Los Angeles police officer killed a young man who was shooting at the police.

Angry members of the community demanded an emergency meeting with the police. At the end of the painful session, a former gang leader concluded that the death was extremely sad, but “if you shoot at the cops, you should expect to die.” Other attendees handed officers rosaries, and they apologized for earlier “kill the cops” talk after rumors that officers had fired when the young man was surrendering.

In the past, there would have been no listening — bottles, rocks and worse would have been the only response. But by morning, calm had taken hold.

The same dividend for guardian policing was evident in Dallas. Despite the worst efforts of a determined, vicious assassin, community policing efforts there yielded an outpouring of public grief for the slain officers and gratitude for their service, as well as equal heartbreak over the recent police shooting deaths of black men. Since the shootings, about 500 people have applied to join the Dallas Police Department.

We have much to do before most poor neighborhoods in Los Angeles see the Police Department through a lens of trust. The Community Safety Partnership is only one unit; we need more. But it is solid evidence that this is not the last century's police department and that guardian policing is part of the solution to conflict between police and community. If it works for the housing projects of Los Angeles, it can work anywhere.

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