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What a small Boston police unit can teach us about changing culture

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How can we change police culture? It's a question that activists have been asking across the country, amid allegations of racial misconduct from Ferguson to Baltimore. But here in Boston, we already know the answer: Change happens when you go through hell and come out the other side.

This year, Ferguson and Baltimore had their racial unrest. But in the 1970s, it was Boston.

In the wake of court-ordered busing, this city saw more than 600 racially motivated incidents a year. In 1978 alone, 24 cars driven by white people were stoned in Mattapan. Thirty homes of black people were vandalized in Dorchester.

Police rarely investigated it. Prosecutors rarely prosecuted it. Sometimes the victims who complained about the abuse found themselves in the slammer.

At the time, the social norms of the city — and the police department — viewed racial harassment as a fact of life: unstoppable, inevitable, and random as a flash flood or a hurricane.

“There was a large section of Boston that thought this is just a natural part of what they had to deal with,” said Jack McDevitt, director of Northeastern's Institute on Race and Justice. “There were questions about whether these were real crimes at all.”

But in 1978, a tiny unit of handpicked investigators inside the Boston Police Department was asked to stem the tide of racially motivated crime.

The team — known as the Community Disorders Unit — seemed destined to fail. It had almost no power to punish perpetrators, except for obtaining civil injunctions ordering perpetrators to stay away from victims. Its members were despised by fellow officers and distrusted by victims, and the unit was widely dismissed as a public relations stunt.

And yet today it is credited with ushering in a sea-change in police culture.

Under pressure from civil rights groups and the federal government, Police Commissioner Joseph Jordan knew he had to curb racial violence. He dispatched 21 officers to protect a black college student named Faith Evans, who had moved into an all-white South Boston public housing project. That was one of the Community Disorder Unit's first assignments. But despite round-the-clock protection, Evans's car was set on fire. She moved out, a widely publicized failure for the city.

Jordan tried again. This time, he asked his deputies to choose a new, interracial team of bright, young, talented investigators.

They got resources, including the BPD's first computer system. They had to attend classes on the history of school desegregation in the city. Perhaps most importantly, they were chosen because of their passion for the cause.

Francis "Mickey" Roache, the unit's first commander, combed through police reports and noticed that the same houses were being targeted again and again, until families moved away.

"This is America," Roache said. "You can't drive people from their homes."

The police officers started trying to predict when attacks would happen. They waited in the dark, inside victims' homes, so they could catch perpetrators in the act.

They set up a special hot line, so victims could talk directly to them, and not to a dispatcher who would dismiss the call. They distributed flyers across the city, asking for tips.

They learned how to predict tit-for-tat violence and sometimes closed off whole streets to prevent retaliatory racial attacks.

They went undercover, posing as interracial couples or gay men, to see whether they were beaten up or turned away from a bar.

"No one before this unit had ever taken minor crime, misdemeanors, looking at them collectively," recalled Joseph Carter, a black officer who — with a black female officer — moved into a Hyde Park housing development to collect evidence of harassment. "People were just thinking that this was part of kids being kids . . . when these were actually very serious efforts to really intimidate people."

A black officer named James Neal drove around for weeks with a Vietnamese student named Nguyen Pham, who'd been kicked and spat on by a Dorchester teen.

Neal eventually apprehended the teenager, who maintained that he'd done nothing wrong.

"He's just a gook," the kid insisted.

But the civil injunction Nguyen Pham won proved otherwise.

"I got a real sense of empowerment," recalled Pham, who was then recruited to join the unit to encourage other Vietnamese to report such crimes.

Working together on an interracial team changed the way the officers saw the world.

"The city was so separated," recalled Brian Flynn, a white officer who grew up in Savin Hill. "People didn't know each other. But I spent more time with a black guy than I did with my wife."

“It was just a great group of very bright, energetic, loyal, respectful people who all believed the same thing: that we could make a difference together,” Carter recalled.

And as they changed, the police department changed, too.

“We brought other officers to ride along and meet the victims,” recalled Billy Johnston, who eventually led the unit. “Meeting the victims was probably the best education.”

The unit, one of the first of its kind in the country, is often heralded as the origin of community policing. “That was the first time Boston police developed relationships with the Asian community, the gay community, black community,” said McDevitt. “The racial tensions would have boiled over in a much different way, if the CDU hadn’t been there.”

After Massachusetts passed a landmark hate crimes law in 1980, the unit trained the rest of the department in how to implement the new law.

“People turned around,” Roache recalled. “Even the hardest people.”

It made a difference that their work got celebrated, and that many of them got promotions. Roache became commissioner. Carter, a superintendent. Johnston traveled the country touting Boston’s success. President Bill Clinton invited him to the White House.

Just as citizens got the message that racial harassment wouldn’t be tolerated, police outside the unit got the message that they couldn’t tolerate it either.

“In Boston, you could do trainings and say ‘You’re going to get fired if you don’t do this,’ ” recalled Gail Suyemoto, a legal assistant in the attorney general’s office who worked closely with the unit. “And it was true.”

Eventually, Boston Police went from being viewed as one of the worst departments in the country on race to one of the best.

There’s still room for improvement, of course. But compared to other cities, we’re doing pretty well. Jim Fisher, a crime writer who compiled a database of 1,146 people shot by police in 2011, ranked Boston as the “least deadly city,” with only one deadly police shooting. (This year, we’ve had two.) By comparison, police officers in Cleveland — a city half the size of Boston — killed seven. St. Louis killed three. Baltimore — about the same size as Boston — killed five. The CATO institute’s National Police Misconduct database doesn’t count a single civil-rights-related allegation of police misconduct in Boston in 2010, the most recent year available. By comparison, Washington, D.C., had four such incidents; Minneapolis had six.

The old-timers who served in the Community Disorders Unit don’t take credit for all that. But it’s clear they are a part of the reason that Boston’s better off than Ferguson or Baltimore today. If whites can drive in Mattapan without a stone going through their windshield, if Asians can walk down Dorchester Avenue without an insult hurled their way, if blacks can live peacefully in South Boston today, it’s thanks to them. That’s the thing about police culture. When you change it, you change the city itself.

On a recent afternoon, a group of the original members of the unit met for lunch. Flynn, a grandfather 11 times over, clapped Carter on the back. Roache sat at the head of the table and glowed. They told war stories, laughed at old photographs that Suyemoto brought, and watched a public service announcement that had run on television warning that racial harassment is a crime.

Nearly all of them recounted running into people they'd punished back then, who sheepishly apologized for their behavior.

"I think we made people realize that it's wrong," said Flynn.

That's the deepest change that there is.