



Police officers' connection to communities they serve is broken. Here's how to repair it.

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The death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers and the follow-on nationwide protests has thrust the issue of police reform from the periphery of the nation's consciousness to a first-tier public policy issue. As is typical in American discussions of crime and punishment, the public remains divided between those who focus on the root causes of the excessive police force that brought on protests, demonstrations and, occasionally, riots and those who are concerned with how the disturbances threaten public safety and the rule of law.

This polarization is not helpful to addressing either the needs of over-policed and violence-prone neighborhoods or better equipping the officers tasked with maintaining safety and order and preventing excessive use of force by the police.

The truth is that our most vulnerable neighborhoods, communities and cities deserve better policing than they are getting, and the overwhelming majority of police officers deserve recognition and support for undertaking difficult and often dangerous work.

Police often subjected to trauma

According to a survey conducted by the Cato Institute in 2016, 60 percent of Americans consider police work to be very dangerous. The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund confirms that in the past 10 years there has been an average of one officer death every 54 hours. In 2018, 58,866 police officers were assaulted and around 30 percent of them sustained injuries.

When officers answer a call to protect life and property they also have to think about protecting themselves in what are sometimes life-and-death situations demanding instantaneous judgment calls about the use of lethal force. Regular exposure to this type of danger as well as the chronic, lower-level anxiety that accompanies police work can fray nerves further and result in officers living, often unaware, in a hyper-vigilant state.

While the exact number of cases remains unclear, many officers suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Suicide and thinking about committing suicide among police officers are also extraordinarily high.

On the community side, things are often equally difficult, complex and highly charged. High-crime jurisdictions are usually poor with all the social challenges and pathologies that

accompany poverty. Multi-generational trauma, the effects of addiction and substance abuse, race and class discrimination, and economic stressors combine to put the people who live in these communities on edge.

Police presence, if it is not cognizant of the social and emotional conditions of low-income neighborhoods and communities, can add stress and translate into a widespread fear of the police.

According to a Reuter's poll, 69 percent of African Americans and 54 percent of Latinos believe minorities are targeted unfairly by law enforcement. According to the Washington Post's Fatal Force project, more than 1,000 people have been killed by police in the past year.

Unarmed African-American people are killed at a higher rate than white people by the police, although incidents of excessive force afflicts low-income whites, too.

An underlying factor in many fatal incidents is the prevalence of mental illness. One study found that 23 percent of the people who died during an interaction with an officer in 2015 had symptoms of a mental illness. In such tinder-box conditions, misunderstanding and misreading, filtered through traumatized police and members of the community, can result in a rapid escalation of aggressive exchanges that result in injury and death.

Approach to crime must change

Crime is part of the human condition and will always be with us, making the police a necessity. But actual prevalence of criminal activities changes and our approaches to the problem should change with it. Certain aggressive and lethal practices — like chokeholds, no-knock warrants and discriminatory stop-and-frisk policies — need to be reformed or banned.

Qualified immunity, which largely protects officers against civil suits resulting from excessive use of force claims, must also be reformed to change police incentives when it comes to use of lethal force.

However, merely limiting the methods of police engagement is not, by itself, sufficient to begin improving relationships between the police and community. It is imperative that we focus on improving police conduct and their capacity for understanding, interpreting and responding to the effects of trauma in the communities they serve — and in themselves.

One of President Donald Trump's recently proposed reforms is to integrate social workers into police departments to take part in responding to non-violent police calls. Such professionals could serve as a resource for understanding and interrupting the police-community-trauma-violence dynamic.

Such staff, trained in understanding how symptoms of trauma and mental illness manifest in individuals, would help officers know when to hold back on use of force, as well as serving as a resource for officers to better understand how the day-to-day grind of police work is shaping their own attitudes, reactions, and responses.

Additional mental health and de-escalation resources also should be embedded in disadvantaged neighborhoods to help defuse conflicts before violence breaks out and help to build a generally more peaceful environment.

Defunding and abolishing police is a utopian project destined to fail, and, in so doing, create conditions for another round of “get-tough” criminal justice policies, programs and practices that have wreaked such havoc on our families, communities and police forces.

This is the last thing a nation riven by social and political conflict needs. Rather, we should to look for models and practices that build police-community collaboration and trust and reduce the prevalence of fatal force.

In the process, we might learn that cultivating more peaceful police forces and communities is not a soft-headed effort in social engineering, but a vital strategy for strengthening communities and the police officers who serve them.