Policing Police Misconduct
Commentary
Jeremy Travis

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It is the best of times and the worst of times for the New York Police Department. Crime rates have hit historic lows. Police shootings are way down. Yet the controversies surrounding the Louima, Diallo and Dorismond incidents have revealed deep fissures in the relationships between the NYPD and the public, particularly the minority community.

Two recent events provide the occasion for a fresh start. Howard Safir's resignation means a new commissioner can recommit the department to restoring public trust and confidence. And the widely reported decision by the Giuliani administration to drop its opposition to appointment of a federal monitor of police brutality cases will usher in a new regime of external oversight.

Yet this opportunity is easily squandered. A new commissioner's promise of a new day may fade quickly. And creation of yet another level of civilian review of police operations is no guarantee that police abuses will end.

This time around, let's try a new approach. Three strategies, based on innovative studies already tested around the country, could be combined to allow public review of police work, create new yardsticks of good policing and rebuild community confidence.

1) The city government should solicit the public's views of police performance through regular, independent surveys. Customer feedback can assess general levels of satisfaction; it can also identify problems early - before they escalate.

- When the biennial public opinion survey commissioned by the Boston Police Department showed low trust levels in certain neighborhoods, police executives responded accordingly. They initiated community-based training involving cops in the youth-violence strike force, clergy and other local leaders.

- Kids, suspects and victims are particularly critical customers of police services and should be polled regularly. The Chicago Alliance for Neighborhood Safety, working with local universities, interviewed young people and learned that many feared the police more than neighborhood gangs. This finding gave new urgency to Chicago's efforts to bring cops and kids together. A second survey, now underway, will yield valuable insight into the impact of this initiative.

- Six urban police departments - including Dallas, St. Petersburg, San Diego and three others - have allowed researchers to interview random samples of criminal defendants and the officers who arrested them to gauge the level of force used. New training on handling confrontations has resulted.

- The Washington, D.C., police will soon mount a special survey to learn whether police treat victims respectfully.

If replicated in New York, these surveys will show whether the police are handling these sensitive encounters professionally.

2) The city should support and publish regular, independent surveys of police officers to get a firm sense of officer morale and the pressures of the job. Borrowing this standard business technique would deepen the public's understanding of the police officers' worldview - critical given the strength of police culture and the seeming impenetrability of the blue wall of silence.

In times of crisis, the focus is on the egregious conduct of a few officers; in the long run, the public and the police need to track the organizational dynamics that support or inhibit professionalism.

- Working with the University of Delaware, 30 police agencies are surveying officers to get a picture of each department's ethical environment. Officers are asked confidentially whether they would report misconduct,
engage in unethical practices or resist the job’s many temptations. Publishing this police integrity index on a regular basis would help restore public trust.

3) New Yorkers should demand ongoing, independent audits of critical police functions, including crime reports, enforcement actions and responses to 911 calls. Headline-grabbing revelations of missing data, doctored records or unfair practices may spur public debate, but they do not create public accountability. Periodic outside audits, by contrast, could create lasting momentum for change.

- A recent report showed that New York police officers kept mandated records of stop-and-frisk encounters only half the time. Annual replication of that analysis would produce more reliable official records. More important, it would identify trends in the street behavior of the police.

- In several cities, police have been charged with rigging their crime statistics. In St. Louis, the police department responded by engaging the local university to check its books so the numbers could be trusted. The credibility of St. Louis crime data is now beyond question.

- A Temple University study of traffic stops on the New Jersey turnpike showed that minority motorists were pulled over at much higher rates than whites. Repeating this inquiry would gauge progress toward equal enforcement of the law.

Whether embraced by the profession, imposed by outside monitors or simply demanded by the public, these indicators of service quality are necessary preconditions to lasting reform. With its national reputation for innovative crime-fighting tactics hanging in the balance, the NYPD can seize this moment to define new strategies for building public trust.

These measures would give New Yorkers and their police common ground for gauging whether New York City is getting the policing it deserves.

Other Publications by the Authors

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