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How Cincinnati Got Its Cops to Support Community Policing

After race riots in 2001, Cincinnati's path to police reform required years of dedication and patience. The hardest part was not turning police into scapegoats.

BY LIZ FARMER | JULY 8, 2015



Protesters demonstrate outside the District One police station in Cincinnati, Sunday, April 7, 2002, during a rally to mark the one-year anniversary of the fatal shooting of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed black man, by a white police officer. (*Associated Press/ Tom Uhlman*)

Former Cincinnati Police Chief Tom Streicher remembers the exact moment when things started to change for him in the city's racially-driven fight between its uniformed officers and community activists. It was 2002 and for the past year, Streicher had been helping to work out a collaborative agreement between Cincinnati's police department and the city's African-American community. The mandate for the agreement was the result of a lawsuit community leaders filed in 2001 that accused the department of racial profiling. In April, 2001, just as talks started, a cop fatally shot an unarmed black man and the city erupted in riots. It made national headlines and Cincinnati became a symbol for broken American policing.

After nearly a year of working on the agreement to reform the city's police department, everyone was frustrated with the lack of progress. One afternoon, Streicher found himself alone in a courtroom hallway with local civil rights lawyer Scott Greenwood, who had sued the police department more times than either could remember.

"What do you really want out of this?" Streicher asked him. "Every time you sue me, what are you really trying to do?"

“I live here – I’m invested in this,” said Greenwood, as Streicher tells it. “I want things to be better. I’ve been beating my head against a wall in a courtroom for 20 years. But I truly want to make things better.”

Streicher paused. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” Greenwood said.

Up until that point, Streicher had thought that Greenwood was simply trying to make a name for himself by harassing the police department. The more they talked, the more they developed a mutual respect for one another. “I realized,” Streicher says today, “we weren’t that dramatically different. There was a lot about policing he didn’t understand, and there’s a lot I didn’t understand about his perspective.”

The distrust between minority communities and their police departments remains a divisive issue today. This past year has been marked by high-profile instances of cops killing people in New York City, Cleveland, Ferguson, Mo., and North Charleston, S.C. And in Baltimore, six cops were charged in the death of Freddie Gray, who suffered a fatal spinal cord injury while in police custody. All the victims were black men. The events spurred U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch in May to start a national tour highlighting community policing. There’s a reason she chose to start it in Cincinnati. The so-called Collaborative Agreement that came out of discussions in the early 2000s created a method for community policing that could be a model for other cities today.

The results are impressive. According to statistics compiled by the Institute of Crime Science at the University of Cincinnati, the department’s police use-of-force incidents (when an officer has to use physical force to get a suspect to comply) have dropped by 57 percent over the past decade and citizen complaints dropped by nearly half. Misdemeanor arrests dropped by 41 percent to 17,913 last year, with most of that drop attributed to a decline in black arrests. Violent crimes have also been cut by 41 percent to total 2,352 last year. (Nationally, violent crimes have decreased by about 14 percent over the last decade, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There is no comparable national statistic for misdemeanor arrests.)

To do it, Cincinnati essentially had to change what it meant to be a police officer. Problem-oriented policing, where police not only respond to calls but try to identify the underlying issues that cause crime, can turn cops into social workers. Promoting that change required consistent messaging over the course of years – not just news cycles – from leaders in government, the police department and civic organizations. Those who couldn’t adapt left the department or retired. Streicher found himself short-staffed until he hired a few new assistant chiefs.

Changing policing is an enormous feat, particularly when it’s done following a long period of strained relationships, race riots and a DOJ investigation. Most cops initially viewed the changes – things like getting at the root cause of the crime to avoid making more arrests, or asking for community input on ways to police – as barriers to doing their jobs. Their job, as they saw it, was

to arrest the bad guys. But now the focus now was on tackling the root causes of crime to reduce the need for arrests.

The department's top brass instituted changes in almost every way imaginable. Gregory Baker, a community developer and the city's former assistant safety director, agreed to become an assistant police chief in charge of implementing the collaborative agreement. He was the first noncommissioned officer to be placed in a command role and it sent a message that the department was serious about changing its policing. With 15 years of working in community development for the city, Baker's main role was to bring his perspective to policing. That included teaching new classes at the police academy on community relations and cultural sensitivity and holding similar ongoing workshops with sworn officers.

"The police world is a very tight-knit, insular kind of world," Baker said. "We have different ways of processing information. I'm looking at this from a community perspective and how police actions impact the community. And police are looking at, how can they reduce crime. There were differences on a daily basis."

The department created a Quality of Life Enhancement Team. Today, 10 officers dedicate themselves in the city's 52 neighborhoods, going to community meetings and walking the streets to talk with residents and business owners. The police chief holds a press conference within 12 hours of any officer-involved shooting and releases any information he can, including the names of officers, to the public. A 30-member citizen advisory board meets monthly with department leadership, as does an internal advisory board. Some officers are "educational liaisons" and help third graders study for the state-wide reading exam, where success correlates to high school graduation. High school graduates are unlikely to commit major crimes.

But the collaborative agreement didn't just call for police to change their style. It also called on civilians to work with police to reduce crime. The agreement created a civilian board to investigate complaints against police. Community meetings used to devolve into police department bashing sessions. It was the mid-2000s, crime had actually gotten worse in Cincinnati and many were complaining that the collaborative agreement didn't work. Streicher remembers when Greenwood and other civic leaders started speaking up for the police. "To get that acknowledgement from our most vocal critics was huge," Streicher said. Over the next year or so, things started to change. "Then you started seeing it in the media and suddenly you could just feel the change in air. There wasn't same tension in community meetings."

Federal Judge Susan Dlott, who oversaw the case starting in 2001, officially monitored the agreement for seven years. But Cincinnati still abides by it today and leaders meet regularly with Dlott. Streicher retired in 2011 (he and Greenwood now consult with police departments on community policing). When Chief Jeff Blackwell took over after 30 years in the Columbus, Ohio, police department, he realized it was a very different city. "The officers here were much more inclined to be open to connecting to people," he said. "In other cities, the police officers are the police officers and the community is the community. There's not a lot of back and forth. Even if there isn't a fracture, there are no hands reaching across that line."

Due to the events over the past year, including a White House task force report that recommended departments adopt some of the strategies used by Cincinnati, Blackwell has spoken at length with chiefs in other cities. But he's not sure how many will be willing to devote the years it takes to bridge the divide between some communities and cops. In Cincinnati, crime got worse after the riots – as it has recently in Baltimore – and in 2005, a RAND study found that residents of black neighborhoods were still subject to aggressive policing. Change was slow and enforced by federal oversight. The city still has its problems. But today both sides agree that the relationship Cincinnati police have with citizens is one from which other cities can learn.

“We’re literally at a fulcrum in our profession, teetering back and forth over different models and methods,” said Blackwell. “Agencies have to be really courageous. It’s been done one way for so many years and that model has to be replaced with authentic relationship building between police and the community.”



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