

The Key to the Future of Policing in America?

By Joseph Goldstein and Kevin Armstrong

CAMDEN, N.J. — As officials across the United States face demands to transform policing, many have turned to a small New Jersey city that did what some activists are calling for elsewhere: dismantled its police force and built a new one that stresses a less confrontational approach toward residents who are mostly Black and Latino.

The Camden Police Department's efforts to reduce its use of force have made it one of the most compelling turnaround stories in U.S. law enforcement. The changes have led to a stark reduction in the number of excessive-force complaints against the police and have helped drive down the murder rate in what was once one of America's most dangerous cities.

"If you're looking to be a high-speed operator, we're probably not the right department," said the current chief, Joseph Wysocki, referring to the type of officer he does not want to attract. "If you're looking to be a guardian figure in your neighborhood, this is for you."

Still, even as many other communities look to Camden as a template for reform, it is far from a neat model.

The disbanding of its old force seven years ago was prompted not by a desire to rethink policing, but by dire finances, a public safety crisis and a political power play meant to break the police officers' union. It took the drastic steps of firing all of the officers to allow the city to start fresh and overcome resistance.

At the start, and even today, the Camden department has followed many traditional policing practices. For example, it has embraced surveillance technology, including so-called predictive policing that relies on algorithms that can help develop patrol patterns. The technology is based on information like friendships, social media activity and past reports of crime that critics contend can reinforce racial biases.

With parts of the city awash in drugs, the reconstituted force conducted a crackdown, which helped reduce violent crime. But it also issued many tickets for small infractions, the very approach that opponents of aggressive policing call unnecessarily punitive.

That seemed to alienate residents the police were trying to win over. But as the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum several years ago, the department came to embrace a softer strategy that activists would like to see adopted elsewhere.

The Key to the Future of Policing in America?

The department also revamped the way it trains officers. It emphasizes defusing tense encounters, handing out fewer tickets for minor offenses and requiring officers to intervene if they see colleagues mistreating people.

Police officials talk about the “sanctity of life” as the overarching thread connecting many of the changes.

Many people in Camden — a poor city of about 74,000 residents across the Delaware River from Philadelphia — said that overall, the changes had significantly improved their interactions with officers. They viewed the force as fairer, less menacing and more effective than in the past.

“For the most part, it did work out,” said Lary Steele, 41, a lifelong resident who works at Camden Tool, a supplier of industrial equipment. “The old cops used to grab us and whip our butt. A lot of the new guys are really nice.”

Zaire Harris, 18, a recent graduate of Camden High School, said that officers were “respectful and just want us to be peaceful with each other.”

Still, there is tension. Some residents described encounters that felt arbitrary and like harassment, echoing the concerns of residents in cities across the country: a jaywalking stop that escalated into a physical confrontation; a young woman who felt demeaned when an officer asked if she was a prostitute.

“They have issues engaging with the community,” said the Rev. Levi Combs III, 34, the pastor at First Refuge Progressive Baptist Church. “They’re unable to see things other than black and white.”

In a city where more than 90% of the residents are Black or Latino, slightly more than half of the police force’s 400 officers are people of color. And, as is true in other cities, many Camden officers live in suburbs beyond the poor and working-class neighborhoods they patrol.

“They don’t know how to approach African Americans or Hispanics because they don’t come from that culture,” Combs said.

The killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis has touched off a searing national conversation about police brutality and racism and has inspired protests calling for the abolishment or shrinking of police forces.

In New York City, the police commissioner disbanded dozens of plainclothes teams known for their aggressive tactics, and the city adopted a budget that reduced funding for the police.

The Key to the Future of Policing in America?

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, a plan is underway to reduce the role of the police in calls involving homelessness, addiction and mental health problems. In Minneapolis, the City Council has pledged to dismantle the police department and to seek “a transformative new model” for public safety.

A spokesperson for the Camden police, Dan Keashen, said he had fielded more than 100 inquiries from police agencies and politicians across the country in recent weeks.

“A lot of it has been about our use-of-force policy,” he said. “And we’ve also gotten inquiries with regards to how do you go about standing down one department and building a new one.”

For Camden, it took a financial emergency.

The city, a former industrial powerhouse long known as the headquarters of the Campbell Soup Co., had endured decades of steady decline and could not afford its police department.

In 2011, around the time Camden was declared America’s poorest city, half the force was laid off. The number of murders soared. A political deal was eventually cut with the support of Chris Christie, the Republican governor at the time: The police department would disband and the county would create a new municipal force.

Camden ceded significant control over policing to the county government in an area where most residents are white. The police chief at the time, J. Scott Thomson, a longtime Camden officer, would remain in charge.

The deal was intended to break the police union, and the new force, known as the Camden County Police Department, paid officers less and hired more of them. In the end, about two-thirds of the officers who had been laid off were rehired.

The department embraced community policing, instructing officers to talk with residents at every opportunity. But aggressive foot patrols led to a surge in the enforcement of the lowest-level offenses, like riding a bike without a light.

Some residents complained about heavy-handed treatment, but others supported the new strategy. The number of murders eventually started to fall, and children who had been kept indoors ventured outside.

Still, after the high-profile police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York, the police adopted a softer approach.

The Key to the Future of Policing in America?

While officers in many jurisdictions have generally been encouraged to write plenty of tickets, in Camden they risk being reprimanded for imposing hardships on people who are too poor to pay fines.

Camden officers are also taught how to defuse charged situations that can arise when a person is having a mental health crisis.

“Before we would draw our line in the sand, hold our ground, and if you crossed that line that was it,” said Capt. Zsakheim James.

Now, James said, officers are trained to do the “tactical mambo — they take a step forward, you take a step back.”

The department’s emphasis on saving lives is reflected in a “scoop and go” policy that requires officers to drive gunshot victims to a hospital in their police cruiser if waiting for an ambulance would cause a delay.

Supervisors review body camera footage not only when things go wrong but to help officers improve their behavior.

“We look at it like a professional athlete watches game tape so they can get better,” said Capt. Kevin Lutz, who oversees training.

Excessive-force complaints have plummeted, from 65 in 2014, to three in 2019.

And the city has grown safer: The number of homicides committed with firearms fell to 18 last year, from 52 in 2013.

Thomson, the former police chief, said the changes were possible because he was effectively handed a blank canvas.

“I no longer had the challenge of changing culture,” he said, “but I had the opportunity of building one.”

On a recent evening, while their counterparts in other cities were deployed to protests, two Camden officers — a rookie and a 10-year veteran, both of them raised in Camden — walked a street in the city’s north end.

As they neared a playground that was closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, the officers heard children’s voices and a basketball bouncing. One of them, Saladin Webb, encouraged a boy to take a shot.

The child did, and missed. Then he asked Webb if he could keep playing. “I know we’re not allowed to be here, but can we stay?” the boy said.

The Key to the Future of Policing in America?

“Just stay safe,” Webb replied.

“Black Lives Matter!” one of the children called out as the officers turned to leave.

“No doubt,” Webb said.

In interviews, many Camden officers credited better relations with city residents to efforts to interact with them day in and day out. Officers are often seen at neighborhood barbecues, working the grill. The department will send out a “game truck,” essentially a video arcade on wheels, as well as ice-cream trucks.

“We’re employing barbecues in troubled areas and stopping to throw that football with these kids,” said Officer Vidal Rivera, who also grew up in Camden. “It’s about establishing that rapport.”

Still, Preston Brown, who coaches football and basketball at Woodrow Wilson High School, said that some of his players regarded the police with suspicion and had complained about being racially profiled.

“A lot of young people don’t trust the police,” Brown said.

Shortly after Floyd’s killing, the owner of a Camden beauty salon, Yolanda Deaver, decided to hold a march. She promoted it on Instagram by writing that “the racist Police are killing our Black men.”

A police officer contacted her, asking if officers could take part.

Just before the march was to begin, two black SUVs pulled up.

Wysocki got out, along with the mayor and a congressman. The chief wound up holding a banner that said “STANDING IN SOLIDARITY” as he marched.

To some residents, it appeared that the police had organized the march. But Deaver said she appreciated the police chief’s support.

The image of the police chief joining protesters ricocheted across the internet and contrasted with clashes between officers and protesters the same day across the river in Philadelphia.