

My Two Cents

Don't Shift School Safety For the Wrong Reasons

- By BOB CROGHAN
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The issue of seeking an improvement of relations between the Police Department and the public is a valid one. The damage done by orders given by previous Mayors from Giuliani through Bloomberg was not small.

A slogan arose over the past year as if it would solve all problems: "Defund the Police." Curiously enough, if you asked almost anyone what they meant by that, the persons you asked began talking about reforming police practices, not simply taking money away.

Actually, I am on both sides of the issue. "Defunding the Police" does make sense where the police are doing inappropriate work, and there are such situations.

Police precinct houses are often old, some actually over 100 years and counting. Properly maintained, a hundred-year-old building can serve a good purpose. Such facilities may need to be updated technologically, and proper maintenance can and should include periodic repainting of the interior walls.

If the local commander detaches from patrol a team of four patrolmen who are willing to paint the precinct house, the job will get done. The only downside is that four patrolmen have been taken away from their proper jobs instead of using city or contract painters.

Focus on Waste

I would favor "defunding" the police to the extent that there is waste, duplication, or jobs better done by others. I would oppose "Defunding the Police" where it hurts their ability to do the job that we want and really need them to do.

I will now proceed to the real and complex situation of school safety.

In the backdrop of the tragic death of George Floyd, an anti-police reaction swept our country. New York City was not immune to the furor, and our own city administration often seemed ambivalent.

This led to a city budget that proposed the transfer of School Safety Agents from the Police Department back to the Department of Education and a Traffic Enforcement transfer back to the Department of Transportation.

This was not the avowed goal of those activists most vocally favoring "Defunding the Police," but some, at least, felt that they had reduced police presence in schools, so they were pleased.

I was not.

The history of the use of School Safety Officers goes back to a far earlier time.

Four Agencies, Four Stories

Before there were such officers, there was a giant NYC school system. It was staffed by Teachers and Principals who exercised great authority over their students. Times changed, and that authority and freedom to react to student misbehavior was superseded by an insistence on Teachers using persuasion over requiring discipline. The Teachers and administrators conformed to the new system, but this did lead to some schools being out of control entirely.

The initial creation of the School Safety Agent provided a new force for authority that restored order within those schools, but the new force was not without its problems.

Aside from the old Board of Education doing a terrible job of avoiding hiring the wrong candidates for the jobs, school Principals' assignment to command them led to problems.

So clear were the problems created by the Board of Education control of School Safety that the city chose to shift its control over to the Police Department in 1998.

Mayor Giuliani shifted many uniformed forces out of their original agencies and into the Police Department.

Once there were private agents on the IRT and BMT subways, but by the 1960s, those "guards" had become Transit Police Officers. Earlier, also, there had been a New York City Housing Authority private guard force, which evolved into a Housing Authority Police Department. Far later, in time, the Department of Transportation set up "Meter Maid" and Tow Operator forces to provide an unarmed law-enforcement element needed by this agency.

The reasons for all these groups being transferred along with School Safety into a single department are less critical to us today than the question of whether the change was a good idea in practice.

Good and Bad

I believe that there are positives as well as negatives in the expansion of the Police Department.

I am well aware of the negatives. Were we not better off with Housing cops who actually knew the tenants? Is the NYPD fully sensitive to the need for staffing of our Transit facilities? Is it attractive to see a uniformed School Safety Officer staffing metal detectors at a school's entry doors?

But there were positives in the transfers and not least in the composition of the School Safety force.

The NYC Civil Service Law mandating competitive testing for Police Officers had led to the appointment of gun-carrying, badge-wearing Police Officers of African-American backgrounds from the early 1900s onward. This one token of equality did not end racism, but it was real and a portent of things to come.

The Transit Police Force and the Housing Police Force were both less white than the regular police force at the time of the 1995 merger. It was not considered an issue at that time, but it was true.

The School Safety Agents and the Traffic Enforcement Agents were more dramatically drawn from our minority population, and they were not the police. They were law-enforcement agents, but they did not carry weapons, nor were they expected to act as police officers.

Before the merger of Transit, Housing, Education and School Safety into the Police Department, there was often visible friction between the first four agencies and police.

Brought Harmony

To cite one such problem, a tow-truck operator complained to an NYC Patrolman that he had been punched in the face by a driver for refusing to unlock a tow. In the incident that occurred before merger, the Patrolman laughed off the assault with a "tough to be you" comment. After the merger, such incidents ceased to occur, because Traffic Enforcement had come to be considered a part of the Police team, and an assault on a Traffic Enforcement Agent was an attack on the family.

I do not know the statistics of how many School Safety Officers or Traffic Enforcement Agents have gone on to careers as Police Officers with the NYPD. Still, I do see the merger made such possibilities more likely.

Beyond that, are we not always decrying the lack of positive role models in minority neighborhoods. Is not a firm, but wise and kind School Safety Agent likely to inspire a boy or girl to serve their community as a Police Officer?

The NYC police force needs to improve. It could be better in relating to the community, and we desperately want those brave men and women to be our friends, helping us but never lording over us.

Many of the sins committed by Police Officers stem directly from Mayors who encouraged the worst instructions. They set down procedures that should have been infamous when written. There was a policy that said a Police Officer was to shoot until the target went down. The result was a bullet-ridden corpse and stray bullets hitting bystanders and other police. There was a policy of stop-and-frisk that alienated and humiliated innocent citizens, primarily minorities. There was a policy of filling quotas and our harsh enforcement for minor crimes that led to an unnecessary death in Staten Island in 2014.

Undercut Officers

All of these policies overruled and disrespected the excellent judgment of the majority of our police officers. Why, if you are serving the public, would you use more force than necessary? Why would you bother civilians in a peaceful situation, not because of your own good reason but because you need to fill a quota? The problem was never the average cop. It was those who gave them dreadful orders.

There are now nearly 5,000 uniformed School Safety Agents. Proposals are under way to take away their connection to the Police Department. Take off their uniforms, train them into a sort of conflict-resolution force, take away their weapons (even though they never had weapons at any time in the past 50 years), and essentially take away all their authority.

They will again be supervised by the local Principal.

This did not work out so well the last time.

All of the proposals may be well-meant.

Fair enough, but let us not be so sure they are right. Could we not try out the latest ideas in a few schools first while keeping the old system in place for now?

Kids' Futures at Stake

We are playing with the lives and education of our children. All of the current proposals speak of being data-driven, and that is fine, but in this case more a slogan than a truth.

I suggest we try out their ideas first and then examine the data from the pilot projects.

I know that the School Safety Agents and the Traffic Enforcement Agents found it hard to adjust to being a part of the NYPD at first. Then as time passed, they found they were set clearer goals and received more consistent support in doing their jobs.

We want to improve upon our Police Department, not just to dismantle it and recreate it elsewhere.

So, I am deeply aware of and concerned about the need for improvement, but I am not in such a hurry as to rush into error. If we make changes, we must be sure they are good changes. Don't transfer School Safety from the Police Department until we are sure it will help, not hurt, our children.

Editor's note: Mr. Croghan is chairman of the Organization of Staff Analysts.

https://thechiefleader.com/opinion/op-eds/dont-shift-school-safety-for-the-wrong-reasons/article_ebb9b074-9625-11eb-ab3d-7fab2b8093e7.html