The horrifying videotape of Los Angeles police officers clubbing and kicking motorist Rodney King after he was subdued by a taser has made the toughest job in our society - the job of police officer - even tougher. Adding to the furor are transcripts that appear to show officers trading racial "jokes" over the police radio after the incident.

The ugly crime of police brutality, with its subtext of racism, is dangerous not only because of the threat it poses to potential victims, but because it jeopardizes the overall credibility of the police. Each blow on that infamous videotape is a direct assault on the hard-won reputation of the vast majority of brave and decent officers who struggle each day to do their best. The mere perception that police violence is condoned, winked at, ignored - or actively encouraged - risks undermining public trust in the police, so essential at a time when so many communities are being overwhelmed by violence and drugs.

Most of the discussion about solutions so far has focused on training and minority recruiting and on the need for police chiefs to send an unambiguous message that abuse and harassment will not be tolerated - that "police brutality begins where resistance ends." All are essential pieces of the puzzle, yet equally if not more important is the need for fundamental reform in the relationship between people and the police - a shift from confrontation to cooperation that only Community Policing can supply.

Negative stereotyping

The reality is that the vast majority of people in this society are also decent people struggling to do their best each day - most people obey most of the laws most of the time. Yet traditional policing, which isolates line officers in patrol cars where they often become slaves to the police radio, reduces the time and opportunity for people and their police to interact. This, in turn, fosters mistrust and negative stereotyping on both sides, all the more dangerous when race is a factor (see the accompanying piece on this issue that begins on page 3).

Motor patrol officers typically see people at their worst, which can make them think that everyone who lives in a crime- and drug-riddled neighborhood is a "bad guy." At the same time, the law-abiding people trapped in
decaying neighborhoods who suffer indignity, harassment, or abuse at the hands of an officer - or who hear about such incidents - can, in turn, label all police as "the enemy."

The resulting "us" against "them" mindset on both sides sets the stage for escalating conflict and violence - and violence merely begets more violence. The only way to end that dangerous cycle is for people and their police to have the time and opportunity to build new bridges of mutual trust and understanding.

**A personal anecdote**

Back when my father walked a beat in Bay City, Michigan, he once used what some bystanders felt was undue force in subduing an unruly bar patron. For days afterward, everywhere he went, people from the beat area would stop him to talk about their concerns.

The daily, face-to-face interaction with the community that my father enjoyed allowed him to dispel rumors and also to offer both an apology for the incident and an explanation of his frustrations. Because he was "their cop" and not a stranger, people not only believed what he said, but they accepted him at his word - and they also knew that they would have the chance to see that he lived up to his promises.

As my father's story illustrates, nothing can substitute for immediate and direct contact and communication between people and their police. Yet that is precisely what has been lost in the intervening years, as the police faced increasing pressure to centralize, modernize, and professionalize, and to narrow their role to crime-fighting.

Instead of spending the bulk of their time with people in the community, most motor patrol officers today spend most of their time with each other, and this makes it increasingly difficult for them to reflect the needs, priorities, and values of the communities they serve. Community Policing, which re-invents the role of the old-fashioned beat cop in light of today's realities, allows the police to share power with the people in the community who are the true "consumers" of police service.

**Community accountability**

Community Policing has also been called Community Empowerment Policing, reflecting the transformation that takes place when people stop being passive consumers of police service and instead become active participants in the process of helping to make their neighborhoods better and safer places in which to live and work. By giving people a direct say in how they are policed, the community also can hold officers directly accountable if they stray over the line, at the same time that Community Officers serve as a check against vigilantism.

The daily, face-to-face interaction between people and their police eliminates the anonymity that allows crime and violence to flourish on both sides of the law. As my father's experience illustrates, his daily presence allowed him to know which people he could trust and which to keep an eye on. At the same time, people in the community knew him and trusted him enough to confront him directly with their concerns - no protests, no marches, and no formal complaint to headquarters.

**Informal problem-solving**

To regain community control, many community leaders have renewed the call for civilian review boards, as a way of addressing the issue of excessive force and to improve police/community relations in minority neighborhoods. Yet experience shows that these boards often do little more than interpose yet another layer of bureaucracy between people and police.
While the formal complaint system provides an important redress, officers charged with misconduct must focus more on protecting their own civil rights and the potential liability of the department than on making amends. The best solution for any crime, including police brutality, is prevention - dealing with the problem before harm is done. With the unusual stresses and frustrations of police work today, it is easy to understand how an officer can be tempted to lash out. But the challenge lies in dealing with the problem swiftly and effectively, so that today's shove does not become tomorrow's punch - or worse, and before a budding "bad apple" can infect others.

Community Policing allows the community to hold officers directly and immediately accountable for their actions. Community Officers cannot "hide" their identify by putting tape over their nametags and badges. They also know that they will be forced to answer personally for whatever they do.

A department-wide commitment

Yet there is grave danger if Community Officers who are allowed to become the "good" cops, while everyone else in the department defines the job of "crimefighter" as playing Rambo in the domestic war on crime and drugs. The danger in embracing warrior imagery is that a soldier's job not only condones but requires inflicting civilian casualties. Indeed, officers who ridicule Community Officers as "lollicops" or the "grin-and-wave squad" perpetuate the macho myth that "real cops kick ass and take names."

Left unaddressed, this internal friction can explode over the issue of police violence. Community Officers can be resented by their peers for identifying more with community residents than with fellow police. If this also means that they break the so-called "code of silence" that abusive officers often rely on to cloak their crimes, the department will be torn apart.

This reinforces the importance of ensuring that Community Policing is not treated as a "special program" but as a department-wide commitment. Motor patrol officers and special units must all be part of a community-based team of problem solvers that includes Community Officers.

The subtle but profound changes implicit in shifting to a department-wide Community Policing approach will eventually change public perceptions. Community Policing redefines the role of the police officer as a modern-day peacekeeper - the true protectors of the community.

The common wisdom is that people receive the kind of police service they deserve, but the incident in Los Angeles should remind us that it is time to add a new corollary - which is that every community deserves Community Policing.

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