What does actual police reform look like? More training and more oversight

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There are few policy reform areas under more public scrutiny these days than law enforcement.

It's one of those topics that permeates the activist and lawmaker layer and engages the broader community at-large, but too often the discussion focuses on surface-level reform items while doing a disservice by not broaching deeper issues.

Community policing and body cameras are "go-to" reform items, and those are steps in the right direction but there's much more that needs to be addressed and the best place to do that is on the local level.

The saying "all politics is local" lends itself to well policing.

America's cities and towns are wildly different in size, population demographics, culture, and socioeconomic standards, so overarching top-down policing policies from D.C. aren't as impactful as those that stem from city hall.

Low-income and inner-city communities — often with large minority populations — often suffer from systemic fear and distrust of police, and it's not entirely irrational.

These communities often find themselves over-policed over minor, economic crimes. With many departments facing quotas — officials or unofficial — and an abundance of ticketable offenses in lower income communities than in wealthier ones, it's no surprise that these communities feel constantly targeted by law enforcement.

On the other hand, years of dealing with resentment and discontent in these communities has perpetuated a culture within many departments where officers feel disconnected and, quite frankly, uncomfortable policing many of these areas.

This factor contributes to officers second-guessing their actions or just not acting in many instances.

Officers need more purposeful training.

In some states, like New York, California, and North Carolina, obtaining a barber's license requires more hours of training than to become a sworn officer.

In Louisiana becoming an officer takes less training than becoming a manicurist.

The Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission trains incoming recruits on how to better be "guardians of democracy", to serve and protect, rather than being "warriors" looking to conquer and control, which is what they say standard law enforcement training is.

Coupled with retraining, local governments should fully embrace independent police oversight boards giving civilians have a voice in policing.

Out of 18,000 police departments in the country, only about 200 have an independent or civilian oversight board. Most major cities have one to review civilian complaints against officers and recommend disciplinary actions to administration officials or the chief, but not all are provided the same scope or authority.

Independent oversight boards are valuable, public trust in the outcome of investigations on officer-involved shootings directly impacts the community's response. All too often internal investigations result in justification for a shooting and communities are left feeling as though justice was not served.

Two persistent problems on many oversight boards are the scope of authority entrusted to them and the requirements for civilians to participate.

In Texas alone, the scope of authority for boards in major cities spans across the spectrum. In San Antonio, the Chief's Advisory Action Board has the ability to interview officers before making a recommendation for disciplinary action to the chief.

Dallas' review board is authorized to hire investigators, take sworn testimony, and subpoena witnesses. Houston's operates largely in private and only takes cases referred to them by the internal affairs bureau of the department.

Many of the boards require members to have extensive background in policing, law, or criminal justice, which excludes much of the community whose concerns they are meant to address.

Civilian boards need power, resources and autonomy to be as effective as possible.

There are few arguments against the effectiveness of police cameras, but the difficulty comes with drafting language acceptable to the department and governing body, getting consensus, and passing.

Policies determine when the officer has the discretion to turn the camera on or off, how regularly it must be charged, if the data on it is subject to public information, the officer's ability to review it prior to making a statement on an incident, chain of custody for the camera, and policy regarding data retention and manipulation just to name a few.

Without a sound policy, body worn and dash cameras don't serve their intended purpose.

Departments are welcoming other technological advances as well.

MobilePD is a customizable app that departments around the country are embracing.

The app allows for public engagement with law enforcement.

MobilePD Connect and the premium version, MobilePD engage, offers alerts, tips, and two-way communication between civilians and a department.

They also offer crime mapping, crime stoppers, photos, videos, and local crime news.

ShotSpotter — another tool growing wider in use by police — allows for real-time gunshot detection and alerts. Through sensors they deploy throughout the jurisdiction they are able to triangulate a gunshot origin, within 10 feet and in as little as 30 seconds.

After identifying the location, they digitally notify law enforcement and first responders.

Many problems and impediments to advancements in a police department stem from funding. When not fully funded, they often look elsewhere to pad their budgets.

Former Harris County District Attorney Devon Anderson, head of one of the nation's largest district attorney's offices, said her department relied on civil asset forfeiture funds to purchase office supplies and toiletries.

This creates a perverse incentive, no department should rely on fines and fees to fill budget gaps.

Local governing bodies ought not rely on the federal government to lead on criminal justice or police reform. If the federal government does want to be involved in policing, its role should be limited to facilitating the discussion.

By giving a platform to local criminal justice and policing reform leaders to communicate reforms to a broader audience, exchange ideas with counterparts they might not otherwise interact with, and to collectively build on the reforms already being made.

Local officials are best equipped to direct policing resources and should take up that helm to bridge the divide found in inner-city policing.

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