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OPINION

Boston police are not Minneapolis police

Fortunately, there is now a long overdue national push to move away from a narrow law-and-order model of public safety. The BPD has been moving in this direction since the 1990s.

By **Eugene Rivers and Christopher Winship** Updated July 13, 2020, 4:12 p.m.



In this 2012 file photo, Rev. Donald M. Osgood, Sr. hugged Aaron Penn, (left) then age 15, of Roxbury and Donalexander "DJ" Goss, then age 13, of Mattapan, for a quick prayer after the two boys spoke about the violence they see in their neighborhoods at a meeting called by the Boston TenPoint Coalition. DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Boston is no Minneapolis, where George Floyd was horrifically killed by police in May, and police reform here should be informed by Boston's experience with community

policing — a national model.

Any unjustified fatality by police should result in public outcry and a demand for justice. [BPD officers have not fatally shot an unequivocally unarmed individual since 2002](#). In three of four fatalities that year, police fired at cars as suspects attempted to flee a crime scene. Much to the fury of the patrolmen's union, then-Commissioner Paul Evans subsequently enacted a prohibition against such actions.

Absent from current discourse is the “Boston Miracle” of the 1990s, when homicide rates fell by 80 percent and complaints against police dropped 60 percent. It was then that the BPD and the TenPoint Coalition, a group of Black inner-city ministers, initiated a partnership that has become a nationally recognized model for community policing.

In 1994, Boston had its George Floyd, or, more accurately, its Breonna Taylor moment, the emergency medical technician who was killed by Louisville, Ky., police in a no-knock raid in March. A retired Black minister, the Rev. [Accelyne Williams](#), died of a heart attack when a SWAT team carried out a no-knock search at the wrong address. At that moment, the BPD realized the critical importance of community partners. At the insistence of ministers from the community, [the mayor and police commissioner held a press conference where the BPD accepted blame](#). Demonstrations, marches, and community meetings followed.

The BPD-TenPoint Coalition partnership was formalized in 1996, after a local gang leader murdered assistant attorney general [Paul McLaughlin](#). The suspect was convicted of murder and sentenced to life without parole. The partnership hosted forums where gang members were offered educational and employment assistance, with the warning that continued violence would provoke the full force of the law. Since 1998, the BPD's Operation Homefront has brought ministers and police into the homes of at-risk youth, where they connect parents to needed resources. Since that same year, the Youth Violence Strike Force has held weekly meetings for community members, nonprofit and government service providers, and police. There are now six monthly community police meetings focused on public safety. As part of the Youth Connect program, key precincts

have staff social workers who connect individuals and families to services.

The BPD has also evolved internally. Officers with excessive arrest rates are red-flagged. Investigations occur when an officer receives more than one complaint in a year. Police training now includes a bias-free-policing curriculum; expanded community interaction and de-escalation training; and direct guidance from mental health experts and the heads of social service agencies. The BPD also co-hosts peace walks and sponsors tennis programs, basketball games, yoga with the police, ice cream trucks, youth dialogues, and more.

Some, however, will respond that during street stops police still routinely use excessive force. Almost certainly there are such cases. But if excessive force is common, given the ubiquity of cell-phone cameras, the absence of videos is striking. That is not to say that officers always treat Black residents with appropriate respect. [The video](#) of the 2018 encounter between Officer Zachary Crossen and a Black male indicates otherwise. And Boston Police officer generated data do [show](#) that during stops Blacks are more likely to be frisked than whites. In addition, there is much work to be done to combat [the city's racist reputation](#), as the Globe's Spotlight Team reported in 2017.

Fortunately, there is now a long overdue national push to move away from a narrow law-and-order model of public safety. As the above history reveals, the BPD has been moving in this direction since the 1990s. Much change, however, is still needed.

First and foremost, there needs to be state legislative action. [Senate Bill S2800](#), now being debated, holds promise, with its proposal to set up a statewide police certification system and a weaker form of police qualified immunity.

In 2017, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court upheld a decision to reinstate Officer David Williams, whom the BPD had twice tried to fire — in 1999 for his role in the beating of a plainclothes police officer and in 2012 for applying a choke hold on a man. In addition, state-mandated civil service and veterans preferences leave the BPD with little control over the hiring process. How can an organization be expected to change and

succeed if it can't determine whom to hire and fire?

Although most recent protests in Boston have been peaceful, there are accusations of [excessive police force](#). Investigation and appropriate action are required. In order to prevent possible conflicts of interest, the Massachusetts attorney general, not the Suffolk County DA, who works regularly with the BPD, should investigate police shootings. There should also be a civilian review board with fact-finding and subpoena power. To create transparency, there should be a public Boston police-crime data dashboard. Where appropriate, tasks involving the mentally ill, the homeless, and drug addicted, [now done by police, should be done by civilians](#). Overtime needs to be reformed. As diversion programs proliferate, there need to be rigorous studies to determine if they work.

Boston has accomplished much since the 1990s. The BPD has been a model of reform for others. However, more work is needed. We must not stop until all Boston residents, no matter their race or ethnicity, rightfully believe that the BPD fully respects them and is there solely to serve and protect them. Boston as a whole, and the BPD in particular, need to recognize the continued impact of its racist history and act accordingly. That said, Boston is not Minneapolis. Assuming that it is creates a bad basis for policy and is an insult to Boston's police and the thousands of civilians who have worked tirelessly for decades to improve public safety and police-community relations.

Rev. Eugene Rivers III was a founder of the TenPoint Coalition and is the pastor the Azusa Christian Church in Dorchester. Christopher Winship is the Diker-Tishman professor of sociology at Harvard University and a member of the Harvard Kennedy School's Program on Criminal Justice.