When I came on the job as a Transit cop in 1983, New York City was seen as a dangerous place. Through the early 1990s, walking the streets or riding the train late at night felt like a gamble—even in a blue uniform. Few people would have guessed that the city would see such dramatic decreases in crime over the next couple of decades. But thanks to the tireless work of New York City police officers, this city is now a vastly safer place to live, to raise a family, to go out at night, or catch a train.

The time I spent patrolling late-night trains and stations with the Transit Police taught me how to interact with every kind of person. I learned that we’re all alike. We all want the same things—to live in peace, to feel safe, to go home to our families at the end of the day. That goes for our cops, as well.

Neighborhood policing, which I instituted as chief of department in 2015, was shaped by my early patrol experiences and my later tours as an NYPD precinct commander. It’s been implemented in precincts across the city since May 2015, and it’s connecting our cops with the communities they serve in new and unprecedented ways.

Community members are seeing the same police officers in their neighborhoods each day, and even learning their names, emails, and phone numbers, for use in emergencies or for addressing issues that require police attention. We have long asked police officers to interact more, to help more, to do more, but we never provided them with the time to do it. Now, cops finally have the opportunity to do more than just answer calls for service. They are working at local crime fighting and genuine problem solving with a team of their fellow officers and the people who live and work in our neighborhoods.

As cop and community work more closely, there is newfound mutual respect growing out of the connection. This connectivity is the way forward, not only for neighborhood policing, but for the NYPD and New York City in general. It’s the cops and the community sharing responsibility for the city and working together to fight crime and solve problems at the most local level.

The NYPD is the largest, best trained, most effective, and most technologically advanced law enforcement agency in the United States, providing safety and peace of mind to millions of residents, workers, and visitors across the five boroughs of New York City—24 hours a day, seven days a week. Going forward, I think we’ll be able to add ‘most caring’ and ‘most connected’ to that list, while continuing to keep people safe.
2016 was a banner year for crime fighting in New York City. Index crime, at 101,716 incidents, hit its lowest level since 1960, when crime reporting was far less reliable and criminal incidents were probably significantly undercounted. Murder, at 335 incidents, remained at the low levels achieved in the past several years, with the years 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 accounting for the four lowest annual murder totals since 1957. There were 998 shootings, the fewest on record, marking the first time that shootings in New York City have fallen below 1,100 incidents. Robbery, burglary, and auto theft each hit levels not seen since the mid-1960s.

Neighborhood policing and unified investigations are driving down murders and shootings, even as enforcement encounters—arrests, summonses and stops—have declined sharply. Compared to the ten year average for 2003 to 2012, the past four years’ average is 26 percent lower for shootings and 36 percent lower for murder. At the same time, enforcement encounters have declined by more than one million from their ten-year highs.
Traditionally, police officers on patrol have spent most of their tours “chasing the radio,” answering 911 calls for assistance. Cops ran from job to job, making it difficult, if not impossible, to develop deeper relationships with citizens—the kind of relationships sought by cops and community alike. As the gap between police and some communities has widened and become a national issue, the need for deeper relationships has never been more urgent. With this in mind, the NYPD has been systematically restructuring how it patrols. Neighborhood policing is helping New York City residents get to know their cops in a brand new way.

In 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio hired nearly 1,300 new police officers, the first NYPD headcount increase in almost 15 years, providing the resources to make neighborhood policing work. Currently active in 44 commands—52 by mid-2017—neighborhood policing increases connectivity between cops and the community without losing sight of the NYPD’s crime fighting responsibilities.

The NYPD has achieved remarkable public safety successes in recent decades, and as Commissioner O’Neill has said, police have a moral obligation to maintain and improve on those successes. Keeping people safe is what cops do, but they don’t, and can’t, do it alone. Public safety is a shared responsibility. Neighborhood policing acknowledges that fact and builds on it.

Neighborhood policing divides precincts into four or five fully staffed sectors, patrolled by sector officers, who work the same neighborhoods on the same shifts during every tour, increasing their familiarity with the local residents and local issues. It seeks to foster a sense of ownership among sector officers—a sense of geographic responsibility and accountability for the people, the problems, and even the perpetrators in a particular sector.

Neighborhood policing is sufficiently staffed to permit off-radio time for sector officers—time to engage with neighborhood residents, identify problems, and work toward solutions.

Supporting the sector officers and filling out each sector team are two officers designated as the neighborhood coordination officers (NCOs). The NCOs are liaisons between the police and the community, and also key crime fighters and problem solvers in the sector. The NCOs immerse themselves in the community by attending meetings with community leaders and clergy, visiting schools and businesses, following up on previous incidents, and using creative techniques and adaptive skills to
To facilitate officers’ work, the NYPD has issued smartphones to all 35,000 officers and equipped 2,500 patrol vehicles with tablets. NCOs and sector officers now have access to an immense amount of information—including various NYPD databases and links to other city agencies—and can perform administrative functions while in the field. The team of sector officers and NCOs share information about the sector across a decentralized communication system. Supported by cutting-edge technology and training, officers are not only becoming even more effective crime fighters, but genuine pillars of the community. Together with concerned citizens, officers are closing the divide between cops and the community, and continuing to keep New York City’s neighborhoods safe.
Public safety is a shared responsibility, so keeping people safe also means keeping people engaged. The NYPD has implemented a host of internal and external initiatives, aimed at engaging New York City’s many communities at the neighborhood level.

Internally, the department has made comprehensive changes to its training regimens. All in-service officers now receive continuing professional education, including a three-day training program that engenders a service-oriented mindset, emphasizes de-escalation, and teaches safe tactics for when de-escalation isn’t enough. Our Academy graduates are assigned to field training officers (FTOs) during the first six months after graduation. The FTOs mentor them in developing the interpersonal skills and the judgment and discretion that are at the heart of police work.

Externally, the Department is reaching out like never before. The NYPD’s Community Partners Program helps rookie officers get to know the neighborhoods they will be serving by connecting new cops with volunteer community members and leaders. Since its inception as a field-training component, the program has also grown to be an integral part of neighborhood policing, and the veteran neighborhood officers now routinely leverage the community partners for their insight on local issues. Connectivity is key to forging trust and maintaining healthy police/community relationships.

Part of the connection is fostered by the NYPD’s use of social media. We use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and www.NYPDnews.com to facilitate transparent two-way communication and tell stories about what police really do and what they mean to New York City neighborhoods. The NYPD has begun to establish Facebook pages for individual commands to engage the surrounding community and provide swift police response to problems identified by local residents.

The NYPD is also engaged in broader collaborative policing efforts, building partnerships with city agencies, non-profits, community-based organizations, the faith community, and other community stakeholders on a wide variety of public safety initiatives. The department is in the process of assigning two victims’ advocates, one of whom will focus strictly on domestic violence victims, to each of the NYPD’s 77 precincts and nine Housing Bureau police service areas. These advocates will help crime
victims navigate the criminal justice system, inform them about available resources, and work with them to determine what their next steps are. This effort will be the largest and the most comprehensive victim services program in the country.

But the best way to serve victims is by preventing victimization. The NYPD’s anti-crime efforts are focusing on the smaller areas within neighborhoods that are the locus of crime and on the individual criminals who drive the violence. Targeted investigations are leading to large-scale gang takedowns. From April 2016 through late January 2017, there have been 124 long-term-case takedowns resulting in 1,128 arrests.

These arrests include the biggest gang takedown in New York City history, arresting 120 suspects charged with drug trafficking, racketeering, and gun-related crimes. The suspects dealt crack cocaine, stored guns at a local Bronx playground, and stand accused of at least eight murders, including those of a 15-year-old boy and 92-year-old woman. Community residents welcomed the removal of these criminals from the neighborhood.

Making arrests like this in the early morning hours, the NYPD is usually back in the neighborhood the following evening to hold meetings with community residents, explaining the actions taken, describing the evidence and charges against the arrested subjects, and seeking community input and analysis about how the arrest operation was conducted.
Since 2014, the NYPD has pioneered "precision policing." The fight against crime is unending, but our tactics shift to adapt to emerging challenges. So the NYPD is changing the way it does business with a new way forward. We are preventing crime and disorder with greater interagency and community collaboration, employing less intrusive tactics, and fostering a renewed sense that public safety means pursuing security and public approval in tandem.

The Detective Bureau has significantly expanded, absorbing all the investigatory components formerly under the Organized Crime Control Bureau, including the gang, vice, and narcotics divisions. This major restructuring has improved coordination among all the investigative assets in each geographic borough, in order to develop cases faster and bring them to successful conclusions.

The bureau’s newly established Gun Violence Suppression Division oversees a relentless attack on gun crime. Its violence reduction task forces bring together teams of local precinct detectives and patrol officers with gang detectives, narcotics officers, Juvenile Justice Division investigators, and others. The approach melds local knowledge and expertise with specialty investigative skills to target violent groups and organize comprehensive investigations. The division also brings in major interstate gun trafficking cases and works with local detective squads in enhancing all gun arrests. Because successful policing requires precision prosecutions, detectives are now assigned to assist prosecutors with gathering the evidence needed to bring the strongest possible firearms cases to court.

At the patrol level, the connections established between cops and citizens through neighborhood policing also deliver an unprecedented level of detailed intelligence about local crime and criminals at the patrol level. They improve officers’ situational awareness, bolster their knowledge of their respective neighborhoods’ unique crime conditions, and channel leads to the local detective squads. At the same time, the department embraces the idea of shared responsibility as it empowers neighborhood residents to play an active role in reducing crime, fear, and disorder.

Technology also plays a decisive role in the NYPD’s fight against crime. Department smartphones provide access to real-time 911 data, ShotSpotter technology, and Crime Stoppers information; thus transforming individual patrol officers into mobile crime-information gatherers.
Gang takedowns are a significant part of how the NYPD does business today. Clearing the New York City streets of their most violent and dangerous offenders leads to a tangible sense of security for neighborhood residents. This infographic illustrates a gang investigation from 2014 to 2016. Starting from evidence about a crew member firing a gun, the case illustrates the dedicated police work and the large-scale investigation that ultimately resulted in the arrests of 14 violent criminals in Brooklyn.

The information available from DAS combines with intelligence analyses from precinct commanders and field intelligence officers to drive precision policing, whether investigations, precinct operations, or the use of tools like the Strategic Response Group (SRG). With multiple missions that include disorder response, crime suppression, and crowd control, SRG and its 725 officers have proven to be a critical asset during events like parades, protests, and the papal visit. SRG also mobilizes for shootings, bank robberies, missing persons, demonstrations, or other significant incidents.

Bringing it all together is CompStat, the NYPD’s command accountability system, which continues to be instrumental in driving down overall index crime. Each week, a different borough command comes to police headquarters for intensive analysis and strategy sessions that cover everything from increases in shootings and violence, to rises in robberies and property crime, to the pursuit of wanted felons. Supported by electronic mapping and other data-display technology, the CompStat sessions are the NYPD’s central crime fighting forum. They ensure that resources are used with precision and are focused on the problems that matter most and the crimes that pose the greatest danger.
On September 17th, 2017, a bomb exploded in the Chelsea section of Manhattan and another unexploded device was found just blocks away. Police Commissioner O’Neill, the NYPD, and federal, state, and local partners led a collective, collaborative response that apprehended the suspect within fifty hours. We were lucky that the attack did not have worse consequences, but luck is not a plan. That’s why, as the NYPD plots the way forward for our city, we have a plan—one of prevention and response.

Fifteen years prior to the Chelsea bombing, policing in New York City—and indeed, America—changed forever with the World Trade Center attacks. The NYPD has pledged to do everything it can to ensure that we never experience such an attack again. In the time since, the department has forged an unprecedented municipal counterterror capacity, including a Counterterrorism Bureau, a revitalized Intelligence Bureau, and increased participation with the FBI on the Joint Terrorism Task Force. With the help of the Police Foundation, the NYPD stationed officers overseas—in 20 different locations, including London, Paris, Tel Aviv, and Abu Dhabi—where they work closely with local law enforcement, gather detailed intelligence, and help shape domestic counterterrorism strategies.

The international threat picture has changed from al Qaeda’s model of massively destructive attacks directly controlled from afar to the ISIL model of inspired, enabled, or directed attacks of lesser intensity but greater frequency. Our overseas officers have been immensely valuable here, after attacks in places like Mumbai, Paris, and Brussels, evaluating the terrorists’ methods and how they might apply to New York City. The NYPD also examined material from the domestic attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando.

One conclusion drawn from this research was the need for an overwhelming response capability in the event of an attack. The tip of our response spear has always been the Emergency Services Unit (ESU), the most highly trained police officers in the world. But the NYPD has now reinforced ESU with the Critical Response Command (CRC), a team of dedicated counterterrorism officers with a range of counterterror skills and training. CRC is prepared to respond to a terrorist attack or lone-wolf active-shooter situation on a moment’s notice. They are further bolstered by another new unit, the Strategic Response Group (SRG), which has personnel with disorder-control and active-shooter training.
The NYPD also boasts officers who rush into literally explosive situations. The department’s bomb squad disabled the improvised explosive device found in Times Square back in 2010 and courageously dealt with the second device found in Chelsea. The squad has 35 expert members; sixteen explosive-detection canines; Andros 6A, 6B, and Wolverine robots; and three total-containment vessels to transport dangerous explosives.

In the event of any attack, highly trained, well equipped units—ESU, CRC, SRG, and the Bomb Squad—will be swiftly deployed. But the first officers on scene at almost any potentially cataclysmic event will likely be a pair of police officers on patrol. And they will undoubtedly, and unwaveringly, rush in to do what they do best; protect the people of this city.

“Public safety is a shared responsibility, and we need everyone’s help. This is a complete paradigm shift in how we’re protecting our city. This is the way forward.”

James P. O’Neill
Police Commissioner
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