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Cracks in the Thin Blue Line

By Ellis Cose

*Police are under fire from New York to Los Angeles to Louisville
Here s a way cops could walk the beat and stay in bounds*

To question police practices in America is to plunge into a debate distorted by caricatures. Police defenders generally see critics as cop-hating bleeding hearts, while police critics often see cops as trigger-happy killers. Yet with major police controversies roiling the nation, it s important to get beyond the cartoons and to ask whether something has gone wrong in the very notion of what policing should be.

During the past month, Louisville has been torn apart by a brouhaha sparked by police killing unarmed black youth. In early March, the police chief was fired for awarding medals to two officers who shot the 18-year-old they claimed was trying to run them down in a truck. The dismissal touched off massive police-led protests and so polarized the community that the Rev. Jesse Jackson flew into town last week to promote police-community healing. In Los Angeles members of an elite and anti-gang unit have been implicated in everything from bank robbery and drug dealing to shooting an unarmed man and framing him for attempted murder. Police Chief Bernard Parks has presented a lengthy report concluding those activities resulted from a few roguish individuals gone bad. The solution, suggests Parks, is tighter scrutiny, better screening and changes in procedures.

Meanwhile, New York is reeling. An undercover cop s attempt to buy drugs from an innocent bystander precipitated the fourth police killing of an unarmed civilian in little more than a year. Instead of responding with sympathy, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani lashed out at shooting victim Patrick Dorismond, offering a minor arrest record as proof that he was a hoodlum. Incensed at Giuliani, some New Yorkers took part in a near riot following Dorismond s funeral. Last week several clergymen, angered by the police commissioner s refusal to apologize for Dorismond s death, walked out of a peacemaking meeting.

Still, for all the outrage generated by the various police actions and Giuliani s attitude, being killed by a cop is not high on the list of dangers

for most Americans. According to federal statistics, you are 47 times more likely to be slain by a lover, a crook or some other civilian than in some dramatic encounter with police. Yet many normally temperate people found something scary in Giuliani's attitude. For he was implying that even a relatively inconsequential rap sheet can justify being killed by a cop. And given statistics indicating that roughly two thirds of black males are likely to be arrested at least once before the age of 30, most any black man shot at random could satisfy Giuliani's standard for postmortem defamation.

Is there any hope for light amid all this heat? A former NYPD detective thinks so. Joseph McNamara, has served as chief of police in Kansas City, MO., and San Jose, Calif., believes the recent controversies illuminate some corrosive assumptions that have crept into police culture. He particularly faults the aggressive street-policing tactics that led to Dorismond's death. The fundamental duty of police, says McNamara, is to protect human life. But in many places that understanding has been superseded by a militaristic approach, one that allows for an acceptable number of casualties and that views much of the population as hostile. The result, says McNamara, is that police officers who should be protecting us are asking people to commit crimes.

Instead of having legions of cops cruising around or engaging in so much perilous (and potentially corrupting) undercover work, McNamara would put them in uniforms and send them on directed patrol. They would become intimately involved in their communities, and adopt a style of policing based more on cooperation than on confrontation. That approach (sometimes dubbed community policing) cut crime in San Jose without alienating residents of high-crime neighborhoods.

McNamara's point is that there is not necessarily a conflict between good community relations and good policing. But simply putting more cops on the streets and calling that community policing is not enough; those cops must be as engaged in building relationships as in fighting crime. Over the last several years, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation has helped launch such programs in cities as diverse as Columbia, S.C., and San Diego, Calif. And police have reduced crime without perpetrating the unsettling impression that every minority male is a potential police target.

Changing the corrosive assumptions that have taken hold with the rise of elite policing units won't be easy. (One interesting possibility: McNamara suggests the financial costs of lawsuits stemming from police misbehavior may eventually lead to an awakening.) Odds are real change will come only with the popular recognition that get-tough policies can destroy trust, and therefore police effectiveness, in the very communities they are supposed to protect.

