

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## As Camden's police chief, I scrapped the force and started over. It worked.

The city needed guardians, not warriors.

By **J. Scott Thomson**

J. Scott Thomson, the police chief in Camden, N.J., from 2008-2019, is executive director of global security for Holtec International.

June 18, 2020 at 10:30 a.m. EDT

I was the chief of police in Camden, N.J., when we concluded the most violent year in our history. In 2012, we tallied 67 homicides, 172 shooting victims and 175 open-air drug markets. Children couldn't walk safely to school. Cops left crime scenes unattended to respond to the next shooting; it was nonstop. Camden was ranked the most dangerous city in the country, with a murder rate more than 18 times the national average. More people were killed in our town of 77,000 than were killed that year in Hawaii, North Dakota, South Dakota, New Hampshire and Wyoming combined.

---

**Support our journalism. Subscribe today. →**

---

And police were not always helping. The city needed guardians, but officers often saw themselves as warriors seeking to dominate criminals through toughness. Citizens didn't trust us, and efforts to arrest our way to law and order clearly weren't working. As chief, I was handcuffed by legacy work rules and binding arbitrator decisions that made it difficult to hold officers accountable for

Support journalism you can trust when it matters most.

[Get one year for CA\\$39](#)



So we started from scratch. We let every city police officer go and created a new department with new rules in 2013. By agreement with Camden County, the city ceased to fund its department and instead paid the county to police the city of Camden. We required all officers to apply as new hires (most officers from the old force got jobs, but not all) and committed to a new relationship between Camden's police and its citizens, around 95 percent of whom are minorities.

AD

It worked. At the end of 2019, homicides in Camden were down 63 percent, and total crime is the lowest it has been in decades. Fewer mothers are burying children, and flagrant drug crime is radically reduced. Here's how we did it.

Camden residents and their police officers had long eyed one another warily. Police violence and the failure to hold officers accountable sparked devastating riots in the '60s and '70s, and bad feelings lingered for decades. Then, a budget shortfall forced

the city to lay off 46 percent of the city police department in 2011 — 168 officers — and demote the majority of the department's command staff.

Over the next two years, in response to a combined fiscal and public safety crisis, the state, county and city agreed to disband the existing force and start a new one. They asked me to run it. Any officer who wanted to be considered for the new force, including me, had to fill out a 50-page application, take psychological and physical tests and pass an interview process that was specifically created from community focus-group surveys about what community residents wanted in their police officers. Base compensation remained comparable, but initially, salary enhancements like shift-differential and specialized unit pay were restructured and certain benefits were reduced. Although the police officer's union has since returned, initially the new officers came on without a union contract.

AD

As chief, I was no longer bound by the old work rules. As a new department, our political support was unprecedented. When the union reappeared, I enjoyed a partnership with leaders there who cared about the community as much as the welfare of their member officers. We were building culture as opposed to changing it. Although it took us more than a year to return to our pre-2011 staffing levels, the initial increase of about 50 additional officers enabled us to instantly boost our presence in the community. I could now accomplish in a few days policy and operational changes — things like codifying the requirement that officers de-escalate encounters before using force — that would have taken years in the old department.

We knew that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results was insanity, so we tried new approaches: Commanders were forbidden from using the phrase “we’ve always done it this way,” because we now operated under the assumption that the old way was wrong. We deployed ice cream trucks and held block parties to build trust between officers and the residents of the neighborhoods they patrolled. The ideology that underpinned these strategies was to create safe environments by getting people to flood the streets they once abandoned. Residents became much more willing to share information that made us smarter in reducing crime. We enlisted former drug dealers returning home from prison to share with kids how to avoid some of the mistakes that they had made.

Instead of a patrol division solely focused on responding to calls, *every* cop became a community officer: It was understood that their job responsibilities also included building relationships. New officers were required to knock on doors and introduce

themselves to residents. How could we address people's concerns if we didn't first know what they were? An officer who spent three to four hours at headquarters processing a meaningless offense wasn't advancing safety or trust. But an officer who is visible and approachable — one who eschews polarizing tactics — significantly alters the chemistry of that environment for the better and creates the peace dividend police desperately need today.

AD

Of course, we used the latest technology to ensure our officers were working efficiently and well — real-time data that I could remotely monitor 24/7 to track officers' activity and location. We decided that deterring crime was more important than making arrests, and that is how we eliminated about 150 open-air drug markets: You can't sell drugs with a uniformed cop standing on the same corner.

As we got to know our neighbors better, we shifted from enforcing the law *upon* them to upholding the law *with* them. Part of this was about eliminating counterproductive policing routines: I directed internal affairs to investigate the department's top five ticket-writing cops each month, because handing a hefty traffic fine to someone who's scraping by can be life-altering, and not in a way that protects the community. Our preference was to issue warnings. The state American Civil Liberties Union chapter and community residents explained that some of our low-level-offense enforcements were making things worse. We listened. Residents

responded with even more communication and assisted us to increase gun seizures by 185 percent within the first few months. As citizens trusted us more, they shared more intelligence with us to make their streets safer. This helped us lift our murder-solve rate from a dismal 16 percent to 61 percent.

We developed de-escalation training based upon the Police Executive Research Forum's ICAT principles for Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics. Sanctity of human life and the Hippocratic ethos of "first, do no harm" were guiding principles. We taught officers how to use restraint in incidents in which deadly force may have been legally justified but wasn't generally necessary if they were smart. And when that last resort was essential, we rendered medical aid immediately after an officer-involved shooting and transported the wounded suspects to the trauma center to save their lives.

AD

There's a raging debate right now about "defunding" the police, but it's missing the point. Communities need police. What they don't need is a cop with a warrior's psyche and an occupier's mentality. Camden's transformation wasn't about getting rid of police or reducing their authority. It was about increasing our legitimacy by convincing citizens that we understood our role. We didn't reinvent policing so

much as reset it to what it always should have been.

Policing works in a democratic society only when it has the consent of the people. The old Camden city police department had forgotten that. Many departments in this country have long assumed that their legitimacy is automatic and that the problem is with the public, not us. But citizens' disdain can change only if we change first.





