

## INTERVIEW

Dean Esserman has spent his entire career in law enforcement. He currently serves as Chief of the Providence, Rhode Island Police Department. He is a graduate from Dartmouth College (B.A.), and New York University School of Law (J.D.). He is a member of the New York and Massachusetts Bars, and is currently serving as the Senior Law Enforcement Executive-in-Residence at the Roger Williams University Justice System Training and Research Institute.



Dean Esserman was appointed in 1998 as Chief of Police in Stamford, Connecticut, where he brought community oriented policing and cut crime by 50 percent. While in Stamford, he introduced many innovations and developed a national reputation as a police leader. He became Chief of Police in Providence in January 2003. He currently serves as a member of the Board of Directors of PERF. Dean Esserman was appointed by the United States District Court to monitor the Wallkill, New York Police Department. PARC served as his staff.

**PARC:** You stated recently that you had some concerns about the state of American policing today. I was wondering if you could explain what those concerns are.

**Esserman:** I am frustrated. We had a real focus on safety and crime in America in the 1970's and 80's

that culminated in it being a political issue for candidates at every level of government, from municipal and gubernatorial elections to even the national elections. There were debates about crime and what to do about it, and the police learned a lot. Today, attention to crime has fallen off the radar screen, resulting in crime unfortunately going back up in almost every community in America. Violent crime in particular is up.

**PARC:** Please give some specifics about the increases in violent crime.

**Esserman:** We lost more than 16,000 Americans last year to murder, 16,000 the year before, and 16,000 the year before that. That's nearly 5 times the number of people killed in the World Trade towers on September 11. Here in Providence, I'm losing citizens in my community every month to murder. Many

communities are losing citizens every week or every day to murder. And yet I don't see the moral outrage that seems to have been aroused on September 11. The government and our great nation are pivoting away from the threat from within and focusing solely on the threat from abroad.

**PARC:** Why aren't people feeling that

moral outrage?

**Esserman:** It's a sense that this is simply a part of life of living in cities across our nation. And we are an urban nation; the majority of us live in cities. In fact, this is the decade that we are becoming an urban globe. It's accepted that part of urban life is living with crime and violence, and in particular murder.

**PARC:** To what extent do you attribute the lack of moral outrage to the rise and proliferation of street gangs where many murders involve one gang member against another?

**Esserman:** I think that's part of the story but I don't think that is all of the story. I think that first off we

have become a nation that has accepted the fact that we are burying our young, not that our young is burying us. It doesn't matter where you travel across the country—if you turn on the TV news, chances are pretty good the lead story is going to be about violence; it's going to be a story more than likely of a shooting. The victim is going to be a young man, the assailant is going to be a young man, and more often than not, the weapon in the assailant's hand is going to be an American made gun. And we have come to accept that that is life in the cities of America. I don't feel the passion. I don't feel the sense of this is unacceptable.

I think part of the story is the gangs. But not every young man is a member of a gang, not every shooter is a member of a gang. It seems that we have become a country that accepts violence and accepts violence among our young. And we also lose focus. It seems that America is a great giant, but the giant is a Cyclops with but one eye, and when we pivot to look at something else, we forget what we were looking at before. In the 80's and 90's, we were looking at crime in America and we brought crime down dramatically. Cities in particular began to be free of some of the fears they have had for a generation.

**PARC:** And at the same time we introduced community based policing.

**Esserman:** Which was a remarkable transformation in American policing. It was self criticism; it was the policing profession— along with scholars and writers and newspaper editors and police chiefs— looking at American policing and asking what we did wrong. We realized that anonymous, distant, 911-driven policing wasn't working. The policing we had done in the past generation had created great distance between us and the community. In fact, the only way to get to know us was to read the badge number that we were forced to wear on our uniform because we

had become anonymous. Community policing was really about building relationships again, building trust. And it was working. It wasn't just better, tougher, tactical policing, but rather it was a new relationship between the police and the community and we were succeeding in building trust and at the same time we were succeeding in bring crime down.

And then this giant Cyclops of a nation pivoted, and we lost focus on what we were looking at. Before September 11, President Bush called himself the

e d u c a t i o n president and looked to make his mark on domestic issues. A f t e r September 11, President Bush became the terrorism and war president, and we haven't pivoted since then back to domestic issues.

*"It seems that our federal government has lost focus on ethics and integrity issues as well. We used to go to conferences hosted by the Attorney General on ethics and policing. Attorney General Reno used the power of the Civil Rights Division to focus on investigation and on monitoring of police departments. Strategies and tools were developed that were working, not without bumps in the road, but were working. And it seems that has all been abandoned."*

We are a nation in which crime is now on the increase across almost every community in America for two years in a row. Violent crime is up; murder is up, there are fewer police officers on duty in every community in America today than there were on September 11. At the same time, we have the enormous incarcerated population in this country and we haven't solved the problems.

**PARC:** One of the things done in the 90's under President Clinton was to add 100,000 police officers to the streets of this country through the activities of the COPS Office and the Department of Justice. Would you advocate increased funding for the COPS Office to add more officers?

**Esserman:** I would emphatically. I think that it is dearly missed. It was an extraordinary event, the 1994 crime bill. The federal government took a look at the problem across the country of crime and the evolution of policing and instead of coming up with a centralized Washington DC approach, the decision was to use tax dollars to hire more officers across the country—not more federal agents, not more federal prosecutors—

but to give money back to the communities to hire officers, and it worked. Now it's a sad state of affairs. You look north of us to Boston, which now is suffering from a loss of several hundred officers from where they were a few years ago. South of us is New York City, also suffering from a loss of several thousand officers from where they were a few years ago. In New Haven, Connecticut, where I was Assistant Chief for several years, a department that's only 450 officers is down nearly 90 officers from where it was just a few years ago. Every community across the country is suffering from fewer officers, is suffering with more crime, and it seems that some of the things we did that worked, we have abandoned—like the COPS office. That seemed to make a difference.

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**PARC:** In the 90's also there was a focus on integrity and ethics issues by DOJ and an emphasis upon patterns or practices police misconduct investigations by the Justice Department. Have you seen a shift away from those concerns?

**Esserman:** Absolutely, I served as one of those federal monitors for four years in a case brought by now-Governor Spitzer in federal court against a police department in New York State. It seems that our federal government has lost focus on ethics and integrity issues as well. We used to go to conferences hosted by the Attorney General on ethics and policing. Attorney General Reno used the power of the Civil Rights Division to focus on investigation and on monitoring of police departments. Strategies and tools were developed that were working, not without bumps in the road, but were working. And it seems that has all been abandoned.

**PARC:** Now you mentioned your role as a federal monitor, and you managed to turn a troubled department around. PARC served as your staff. Was

it difficult to gain the confidence and trust of the police and the town?

**Esserman:** No. And if you ask the Police Chief, or the Town Supervisor, or the Town Board whether their community is in better shape today, after four years of being under monitoring, they would all agree that it is. I think the community benefited, I think the police department benefited. We not only played watch dog for compliance, but we were active in moving that department forward. At the request of the Town Board and Police Chief, we provided advice concerning a new contract for police officers. The Town Board consulted us in the search for the new police chief and in the design and building of a new police headquarters.

**PARC:** Did you have any role models whose work as monitors influenced you?

**Esserman:** I talked at length to colleagues who were monitors at the conference PARC hosted in California a few years ago; it was a great opportunity to talk, share ideas. I saw different styles of monitoring. I was particularly interested in the monitoring in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where the police chief and monitor came together and worked closely in making change. And I used that as a model, as a good example.

**PARC:** The role of local police in enforcing federal immigration laws and dealing with immigrant populations is a matter of contention. What are your thoughts on that issue and are you more or less concerned today?

**Esserman:** I'm more concerned. The ambivalent way that our nation welcomes or responds to immigrants causes real problems. In my hometown of New York City, we have that beautiful Statue of Liberty welcoming immigrants to our nation. Yet we at the

same time are issuing conflicting policies and sending some pretty contradictory messages to those who come to our shores. We seem to forget that we all come from an immigrant family. I see now today, as a police chief, how we are dealing with immigrants who come from south of our border and from Africa and parts of Asia. It seems that we have forgotten Emma Lazarus's words on that beautiful Statue. [Dean Esserman is referring to the poem in the text box on this page.]

I don't know how welcome immigrants feel today. I don't know how trusting they are of uniformed authority. That the federal government has asked us to get involved in immigration issues, I think has made policing and public safety a harder job to do here.

**PARC:** Let me ask not only about immigrants. You have been particularly sensitive and eloquent respecting the disparate impact of our criminal justice system and policing on communities of color. Have you become more or less concerned about those issues in recent years and, if so, why?

**Esserman:** We have retreated from that issue. I think about another famous statue standing in the halls of my law school, that of Justice holding the scales, blindfolded. These days, I think she's peeking out from under it and noticing race. My experience is that people of color very often do not feel comfortable with the role of police in their community; that they have had some pretty uncomfortable experiences. It is very hard to really understand what it feels like to be

stopped, in a car or on foot, by a uniformed officer on a pretext and then to be frisked or ordered out of the car. A person can't help but surmise that he or she was stopped because of looking "out of place" by virtue of skin color. That experience and pain rarely goes away, even years later.

### *Emma Lazarus' Famous Poem*

#### *The New Colossus*

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes  
command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

So what makes it different is when officers become part of the community. They know people, they know their community, they are going to be with their community day in and day out. Too often today, the relationship is between a uniformed officer who is an anonymous figure passing through your street or passing down your highway and some anonymous citizen.

I have run several departments where I sent white officers into all-black communities as neighborhood beat officers, and I have listened to one story after another from people coming down to headquarters to see me and saying, "You know, Chief, I don't particularly like your

department and I don't know if I even like you yet, but I love that cop you put in my neighborhood and don't you ever take that cop out of my neighborhood. He's become part of our community."

**PARC:** Where those relationships have not been forged, do you find people more reluctant to report crime?

**Esserman:** I'll tell you a story of my son, who is in graduate school in Washington DC. As an honest police chief on a city salary, I couldn't afford a car

when he graduated college, so I bought him a bicycle. The first month he is down there, he called to say his bicycle was stolen. Now let me ask you a question, who do you think was the first person he called when his bicycle was stolen in Washington DC? It was me. If the son of an American police chief doesn't call 911, aren't we in trouble? The reality is that we now know that more than half the crime in this country never gets reported to the police. The point is when you are a victim of a crime, whether it's personal or property, it's intimate, it's frightening. You call who you know, and it's not the police anymore. So, even the son of an American police chief will call his father from another part of the country before he will pick up the phone to call 911.

**PARC:** Let's talk about Providence for a second. You came to Providence and into a community that was troubled and where the relationships between the minority communities and the police were already significantly abraded. As I recall when you came in, there were calls for a citizens review board. You seem to have caused the situation to turn around. If that assessment is correct, what did you do that others have not?

**Esserman:** Well, you know it was a time of traumatic change. The former mayor, who was the longest serving mayor in America, went to jail. He had completely corrupted the police department and its leadership. He was the king and they were forced to be his army. Then a new mayor was elected, who recruited me. Though most police chiefs don't like to admit it, I believe a police chief is really only as good as a mayor lets him be. Our Mayor, David Cicilline, is a pretty remarkable man who let us do a good job. He allowed us to return the police department to the people. We became the people's police department. We reorganized ourselves to become a truly neighborhood based police department driven by neighborhood concerns. As such, we began to regain

the trust that had been lost so long ago. Along the way we also brought crime down. Four years in a row, so far, Providence is one of the few cities in the country where crime is still going down dramatically. The murder rate has been cut in half. We are burying fewer young people than we have in a generation in this city and the police are becoming trusted allies in every neighborhood, in every community.

**PARC:** As you look to the future of American policing, what do you see?

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**Esserman:** I go back to what worries me most. I'm the father of three children. I refuse to pass a world over to my children where fathers and mothers are burying their children and where that seems to be okay. It's not okay; it's not okay at all. I have three children of my own, and I also have another 28,000 children. The children of this city are my children. I go to every shooting in this city. I go to every emergency room. I go to every funeral. We're not going to continue to accept the fact that it's okay. The children of my city are not being killed by insurgents from Iraq. They are not being killed by terrorists from Al Qaeda. They are killing each other, and that is happening in every city in this country, and I do not see the moral outrage. I love my country, I'm a patriot. I don't want this country to be defenseless against terrorists, but neither do I want this country to abandon the fight within by just looking across the ocean to find problems. And that is something I think about all the time.