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THE PROBLEM WITH COMMUNITY POLICING

BY THE ABOLITION RESEARCH GROUP

THE ABOLITION RESEARCH GROUP WAS A
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PRO-POLICING RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA)

Federal agency, established in 1968 under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act. Provided grants to local police departments to upgrade equipment and conduct research on effective policing strategies. Abolished 1982.

Police Foundation

<http://www.policefoundation.org/content/our-research>

Nonprofit think tank, founded by the Ford Foundation in 1970. Works to enhance police efficiency and effectiveness through independent research on police strategies, technologies, and performance.

Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)

<http://www.policeforum.org/publications>

Membership organization of police executives from large jurisdictions, founded in 1976. Promotes police professionalism by conducting research, and developing policy recommendations and best practices. Coordinated nationwide conference calls of city police chiefs to repress the Occupy movement, fall 2011.

Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)

<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=2500>

Office within the U.S. Department of Justice. Established in 1994 under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Has provided over \$14 billion in grants to local departments to hire community policing officers and institute reforms. Suffered cutbacks under Trump administration.

In addition, municipal police departments often enjoy the support of local police foundations, which support nearby jurisdictions through grants for equipment, personnel and programs. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Police_foundation

THE PROBLEM WITH COMMUNITY POLICING

For a brief moment, it appeared state and federal officials were ready to reform the U.S. policing system. In March 2015, President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing issued recommendations to police departments nationally, intended to address the police murders that had sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. A key component of these recommendations was "community policing": this strategy, the report claimed, would "help community members see police as allies rather than as an occupying force," and would help police "work in concert with other community stakeholders to create more economically and socially stable neighborhoods."¹ For some activists, community policing promised to ameliorate harassment and brutality.

The election of Donald Trump, however, froze police reform in its tracks. Almost immediately upon taking office, Trump dismantled the Obama administration's reform efforts, and issued a series of executive orders to support "law and order" crackdowns by police and immigration agents. Activists in many parts of the country now found themselves fighting to win back the very "community policing" reforms that the previous administration had advocated. But what is community policing, beyond the buzzword? Does it really offer a solution to police violence and community problems?

1. President's Task Force. 2015. *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Pg. 42.

This pamphlet provides an overview of the community policing paradigm, a history of past and present community policing programs in New York City, and some recommendations for activists aiming at police abolition. Far from an alternative to Trumpism, we argue that community policing is itself a problem that must be counteracted by transformative social movements.

Why is community policing a problem, not a solution?

- Community policing is used to bolster the legitimacy of the police when they are undermined by protest and crisis;
- Community policing cannot solve the problems that cause crime, but can only displace them temporarily;
- Community policing is used as an excuse to expand police funding and hiring;
- Community policing extends police presence and surveillance into everyday life, and turns social problems into police problems;

To demonstrate these points, we have to begin at the birth of the community policing paradigm, in the rebellions of the 1960s.

1. BORN IN FLAMES

In the mid-1960s, the black movement against racism and poverty moved from the deep south to the urban north. Riots swept nearly every major American city, sparked by incidents of police brutality and the assassination of black leaders. The uprisings caught police forces by surprise. As one LAPD officer described the 1965 Watts rebellion: “Everything we believed would be effective didn’t work. We withdrew officers; that didn’t work. We put more officers in; that didn’t work. We used our black and liaison officers; that didn’t work.”² The unrest proved to state officials that the relationship between police and black communities was indeed broken, and prompted a reconsideration of

partner with the police. It could also entail critiquing the contribution of criminologists and other academics to pro-policing initiatives.

Another set of strategies could work to redefine community problems and their possible solutions. This could happen both inside and outside the existing political structure. On the one hand, activists could push city governments to cut police budgets, and put the money into housing and schools instead. On the other hand, they could develop institutions to address community issues autonomously from the police. This could involve holding public forums and tribunals on police violence, or community assemblies on the root causes of neighborhood violence. It could involve establishing standing neighborhood-based groups to address problems without calling 911, and developing copwatch networks to confront egregious cases of police abuse. Activists can pursue whichever strategies work best from their given social position, and follow the lead of radical organizations led by people of color.

These strategies are merely suggestions, building from the research presented in this pamphlet. It’s up to activists to further develop and test them in practice. All struggles are difficult, and their outcomes are never assured. But by preventing the legitimization of the police force, re-framing the issues faced by our communities, and developing the seeds of popular counter-power, we can move closer to a world beyond police and prisons.

2. Quoted in Moore, M.H. (1992). *Problem-solving and community policing*. In Tonry, M. & Morris, N., Eds., *Modern policing* (Vol. 15). Chicago and London: The University of Chicago.

Behind the new names, the NYPD's most recent turn to community policing still rests on the power to detain, arrest, harm and kill. When right wing critics claimed the new program would reduce police officers to social workers, then-Commissioner Bratton assured them this was not the case. The pilot program, he pointed out, had already led to a successful case of snitching and arrest in the 34th precinct: "learning who are the right informants, getting people to give you leads on where criminals may be, where weapons may be. Doesn't sound like social work to me," he said, "sounds like policing."⁷ He was absolutely right.

6. TOWARD ABOLITION

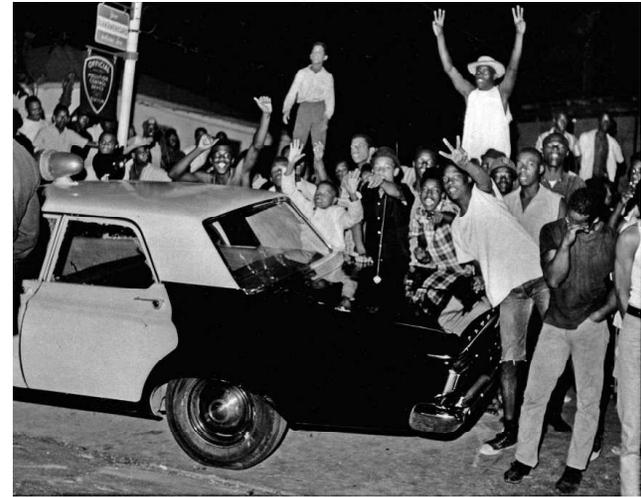
By now the problems with the community policing paradigm should be clear. The paradigm aims to shore up the legitimacy of police department in periods of crisis. It displaces social problems without solving them. It grows the carceral state, and extends police powers more intimately into everyday life. Activists today face a big challenge: we not only have to beat back the "law and order" reaction of the Trump regime, but we also have to discredit police reform efforts that offer false alternatives. We must continue to build a struggle that aims beyond community policing, and works instead to solve the social problems created by capitalism, and ultimately to abolish police and prisons. The authors of this pamphlet foresee two sets of strategies that could help achieve these goals.

One set of strategies could aim to undermine the formation of a new popular consensus around the police. Community policing efforts draw together specific sections of society--business owners, homeowners, landlords, religious organizations, and nonprofit and city staff--to legitimate the harassment and repression of the poor and people of color. Activists can prevent these blocs from cohering by injecting resistance and controversy into the process. This could happen through speakouts at police-community forums, copwatch patrols focused on community policing officers, and public critiques of nonprofit organizations that

7. Prendergast, Gartland & Fredericks. June 26, 2015. "NYPD Hopes Making Cops Your Friend Will Fix Community Relations." *The New York Post*.

policing strategy at all levels of government.

At the federal level, the 1968 Kerner Commission on Civil Disorder and the 1967 Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement investigated the causes of the rebellions, and drafted recommendations for how to avoid them in the future. Both called for stricter controls on police use of force, and closer relationships with community members. On the local level, police departments across the country began experimenting with new tactics. Los Angeles instituted a "team policing" model, in



Watts riots, August 1965

which pairs of officers covered small beats on foot, rather than cruising large areas in squad cars. Seattle and Hartford started crime prevention programs, to help residents upgrade home security. Throughout the 1970s, departments across the country established community relations units, deployed community affairs officers, and trained neighborhood watch groups.

In the same period, a series of think tanks arose to improve policing techniques, including the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the Police Foundation, and the Police Executive Research Forum. These institutions provided technical and research assistance to local departments, and built collaborative ties between local police bureaucracies, federal agencies, and criminologists. The Police Foundation in particular produced new research on police strategy and

tactics, which overturned many established ideas about law enforcement, and ultimately cleared the way for community policing to emerge.

Before the 1970s, relatively few studies had been conducted into how cops did their jobs. Most departments improvised based on “common sense” notions about the nature of crime, and copied whatever methods seemed to be working in other cities. By the 1960s, a modern policing strategy based on car patrols, radio communications, and centrally-controlled dispatch systems had evolved. But now the cars-and-911 paradigm was overturned. In Kansas City, researchers found that increasing car patrols in a given area had almost no effect on crime rates, and that response times to 911 calls had no effect on the outcomes of incidents. In Newark, researchers found that fear of crime was just as important to residents as actual crime rates, and foot patrols helped with the former, but not the latter.

The policing paradigm of the early 20th century, already delegitimated in the streets by black protest, was further invalidated by the findings of professional researchers. It was clear to public officials and the police brass that a new approach was needed. But what would it be?

2. THE PARADIGM SHIFT

In the 1980s, think tanks and criminologists proposed a range of new approaches to policing. Two of the most influential were “broken windows” and “problem-solving” policing, which eventually fused together within the modern community policing paradigm. Broken windows theory was developed by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, and popularized by the conservative Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. It assumes that small incidents of social disorder (like littering, drinking in public, or literally broken windows) signal to people in a given area that social controls are weak, and thereby encourage them to commit further crimes. Rather than chasing violent crimes, the theory goes, departments should focus on low-level offenses. This will strengthen the sense of order in a given neighborhood, and ultimately prevent bigger crimes from occurring.

Broken windows theory has been widely criticized since its inception. Researchers denounced the theory on empirical grounds, repeatedly

These programs are widely supported by liberal politicians and community groups, yet they do nothing to improve the low-wage labor market in which many public housing residents are trapped, nor the budget crisis that is plunging public housing itself into disrepair. And when the programs don't work, the NYPD has more repressive methods: militarized gang raids targeting youth of color, dozens of which have been executed in New York City public housing in recent years.⁶

But by far, the bureau's flagship effort is its Neighborhood Policing initiative. This project began with a pilot program in the summer of 2015, and has since expanded citywide. Under this strategy, a cadre of “neighborhood coordination officers” (NCOs) are devoted to specific sectors in each precinct. For part of their workday, these officers set aside responding to 911 calls, and instead develop relationships with local community leaders and organizations, and identify ongoing problems. Their efforts are overseen by specific community policing officers, who have access to CompStat data on the local level through smartphones and iPads. NCOs host periodic “safety summits” throughout the year at community centers or churches in the area. These meetings draw attendees from the relationships officers have established, and provide a forum to them to air grievances to the police. In turn, the police use the meetings to gather information about areas or people in the neighborhood they should target, and craft interventions that will meet with the support of the stakeholders they have selected.

In practice, neighborhood policing works to extend NYPD surveillance deeper into poor and working class communities. It broadens NYPD contact with neighborhood social networks, beyond the few homeowners, small businessmen, church officials and senior citizens who already attend community meetings at the precinct houses themselves. It encourages neighbors to inform on each other, and expands data collection about local residents. And as with all community policing programs, it does not solve the problems of capitalist inequality. Instead, it expands police presence in daily life, and turns social problems into police problems--which may then be met with state violence.

6. For more information on the spate of gang raids, see the “In The News” section of the Bronx 120 website: <http://www.bronx120.org>

have proven incapable of slowing the ballooning homelessness crisis. But these programs can be made politically useful through community policing. By diverting their targets to ineffective social services before arresting them, police can rebuild their legitimacy in communities, shift blame onto individuals for failing to overcome their own issues, and justify their eventual resort to repression and arrest.

We see the same dynamic at work in the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety, which brings NYPD officials together with city



The NYPD's "neighborhood policing" strategy has now been implemented citywide. (Photo: Gerardo Romo via El Diario)

agencies, tenants councils, churches and businesses to address crime in public housing facilities.⁵ The plan include a \$139 million investment in security systems such as lights, cameras, and door locks. Its NYC Ceasefire program addresses gun violence through collaboration with social service agencies such as New York Foundling, the Brownsville Community Justice Center, and Community Solutions. Under Ceasefire, cops approach young people at meetings with NGOs and community representatives, threatening them with arrests while also directing them to social services.

5. For an overview of the plan, see: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/criminaljustice/work/strong-neighborhoods.page>

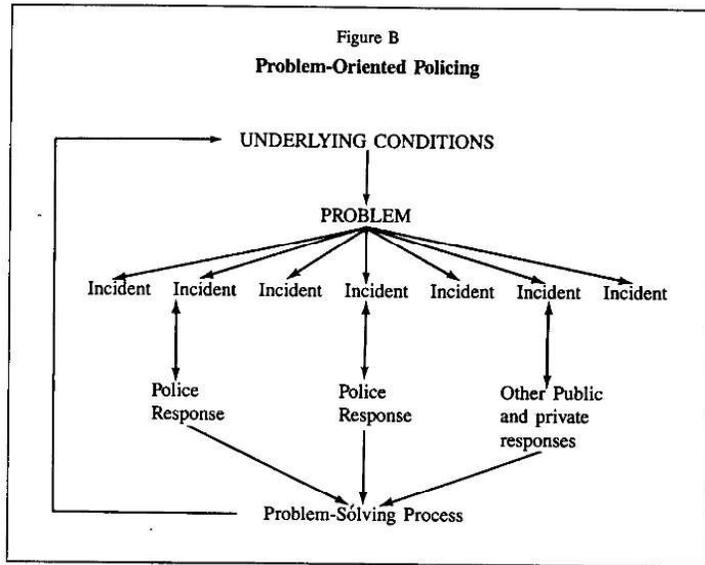
showing there is no correlation between broken windows policing and reduced crime rates, and highlighting how it unfairly targets the leisure habits of working class communities and communities of color, while leaving untouched the activities of the wealthy in private or indoor settings. Others critiqued the theory on conceptual grounds, noting that "broken windows" problems such as graffiti do not inevitably symbolize the same thing to everyone, and therefore do not necessarily have the negative effect imagined by Wilson and Kelling.³ Nonetheless, a focus on small-scale offenses as a means of crime control is now common sense in many U.S. police departments.

A second theory developed in the 1980s was "problem-oriented policing," put forward by criminologist Herman Goldstein. In Goldstein's view, the shortcomings of modern policing could not be overcome with a simple change of tactics. Instead departments needed to change their entire strategy to crime fighting: rather than acting as an emergency response service, the police should work to address underlying causes generating such incidents in the first place. This should be accomplished by collaborating with local communities, to identify problems that matter to residents, examine their causes, and craft solutions. For example, if cops were regularly called to deal with fights after school, departments should work with school administrators to stagger dismissal times and establish after-school activities, rather than simply making arrests.

These ideas were discussed throughout the 1980s by police bureaucrats and researchers, and were eventually synthesized under the "community policing" buzzword. Gradually the term "community policing" came to refer to strategies in which the cops collaborate with communities to solve local problems, often taking low-level crimes as their starting point for intervention and enforcement. Some departments implemented it by establishing standalone community policing programs, while others (notably San Diego) adopted the paradigm as the overarching strategy of their entire police force. Different departments struck different balances between problem solving and "broken windows" approaches.

3. For an overview of these critiques, see Harcourt, Bernard E. 2001. *Illusion of order: the false promise of broken windows policing*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

The community policing paradigm was institutionalized at the federal level in 1994, with President Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Among other things, the act established the office of Community Oriented Policing Services (C.O.P.S.) under the Department of Justice, to help departments across the country



Goldstein's "problem-oriented policing" diagram

implement community policing. Since its founding, C.O.P.S. has provided over \$14 billion in grants to local police departments, to hire community policing officers and undertake department-wide reforms. It has established regional training centers in collaboration with nonprofit organizations, to help train officers in community relations. And it has distributed a range of "how-to" guides to local departments, helping officers learn how to analyze and solve problems they might encounter, from dogfighting to big parties.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, liberal public officials are arguing that the same policing model of the past 20 years can be improved to solve the problems of police brutality. To them, more community policing--more local problem solving plus broken windows enforcement--is the answer. Unfortunately, this strategy is doomed to failure.

new, liberal mayor, Bill de Blasio. The bureau has since been at the center of the department's response to anti-police brutality protests. While the "community policing" label has a bad reputation in the police bureaucracy, the new bureau essentially implements the same philosophy under different names, most notably with its new Neighborhood Policing initiative. Deputy Commissioner Susan Herman described the bureau as "a gateway for other city agencies to join with the Police Department." For Commissioner Bratton, "collaboration is just a more intimate form of community policing."

The bureau incubates community policing programs at all levels of the department, and builds relationships between the NYPD and other state and non-governmental organizations. At its top levels, it tweaks NYPD policy and establishes new programs in collaboration with other institutions. At a March 2015 city council hearing, Deputy Commissioner Herman claimed the bureau had worked to date with 43 government agencies and 87 nonprofit organizations (though she didn't name them). Many of these efforts were geared toward "problem-solving" solutions to recurrent crimes.

For example, Herman claimed the bureau had partnered with the MTA, the Department of Homeless Services, and the Bowery Residents Committee to channel homeless people into the shelter and social service system in place of arrest. It joined with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to open a "health diversion center" in East Harlem, to provide mental health and substance abuse services in lieu of arrest for low-level offenses. Very often, diversion programs like these follow a zero tolerance model. This means a person gets a single chance to go through the diversion program. If they are picked up for future offenses, access to the diversion program is denied, and the person enters the system again. In this way diversion programs reduce social services to a tool in the police's armament, alongside guns and tasers.

Since the 1970s, neoliberal politicians have gutted the welfare state at local, state and federal levels. Now in place of a robust social safety net, many cities get by on underfunded, overburdened public works and programs administered by NGOs. These systems are totally inadequate to meet social needs: in New York City, for example, diversion programs

Police Spending (billions of dollars)
New York City 1986 - 2012



pay for the officers. Once again community policing was used to expand the carceral state.

In the 1990s, community policing reforms paved the way for their own abandonment and reversal. They sparked bureaucratic resentment and encountered implementation problems, all while expanding the police resources that would later be directed toward more repressive tactics. Employed and repealed at the whim of mayors and police officials, community policing was first used as a means to rebuild the legitimacy of a discredited police force. Once that task was accomplished, it was easily transformed into arrest-based, iron-fisted policing, all while allowing the NYPD budget years of steady growth. Today, after the police murder of Eric Garner, NYC is poised to repeat the same cycle.

5. 2015: YEAR OF THE BOOMERANG

In the wake of the Bloomberg era stop-and-frisk controversy, newly reappointed Police Commissioner William Bratton re-established the Bureau of Collaborative Policing within the NYPD in 2014 under the

3. A HOUSE OF CARDS

While it seems unassailable, the community policing paradigm actually rests on shaky ground. On the most basic level, cops often dislike it: many reform efforts meet resistance from entrenched institutional interests, used to other forms of policing. Rank-and-file cops resent having to act like “social workers,” and give up the “hard charger” emergency response roles that bring prestige among their peers. Mid-level police administrators resent their authority being shifted toward local problem-solving units. And with few clear ways to measure community policing outcomes, it often proves difficult to assess community policing officers’ performance and guarantee them promotions and advancement.

But on a deeper level, the community policing paradigm is beset by major internal contradictions, which create problems whenever it is implemented. The first of these is the problem of “communities,” and how they are understood in community policing efforts. The second is the problem of “problems,” and how they are defined and solved.

First, while community policing aims to foster dialogue between cops and communities, “communities” themselves are not unified entities with shared values, interests, and needs. On the contrary, most communities are internally fractured by race, gender, and class inequalities because we live in an oppressive and exploitative society. When cops partner with “the” community, they inevitably find different sections of the community already pitted against each other--and they pick whichever side stands to stabilize the social order and re-legitimate the police force. Local homeowners get cops to take their side against neighborhood kids, who are then cast as delinquents. Local businesses get the cops to chase away the homeless people begging outside their stores. In effect, police-community partnerships unify “respectable” parts of communities behind the police, and legitimate crackdowns on whoever lacks wealth, status or power. Far from improving our lives, this tends to reinforce and deepen the already-existing divisions and inequalities within communities, neighborhoods, and the larger society.

Second, community policing cannot solve social problems. As members of an armed bureaucracy, the police are empowered to do

certain things--notably, detain and arrest people, and sometimes kill them. But there are many things they cannot do. Cops cannot raise wages, lower the cost of living, or make education free. They cannot change prison policy, or grant amnesty to undocumented immigrants. In short, they can't address the conditions that enable community violence and exploitation to occur. But instead of quitting their jobs and addressing these issues directly, officers often simply re-define "problems" to fit what they are already equipped to handle. They tend to view complex social problems as simply a bad combination of perpetrators, victims, and "criminogenic" environments, and tweak each to make the symptom--crime incident reports--go away. For example, precincts might start a program to give delinquent youth job skills, even though no good jobs exist in the service economy. Or they might install street lamps and cameras on a corner where muggings occur, without changing the neighborhood inequalities that incentivize theft. In reality, the problems are never solved: they are just temporarily displaced, in a way that makes cops look good and increases their public support.

The community policing paradigm will inevitably hit these contradictions wherever it is implemented, because police departments are called upon to maintain order in a social and economic system built on exploitation and oppression. When this happens, the soft elements of community policing tend to fall away, leaving only the hard core of police repression. "Problem-solving" comes to mean addressing the problems bothering the white, wealthy and powerful. "Broken windows" enforcement comes to mean targeting poor people of color, and the police authority to exercise state violence comes to the fore. New York City provides an excellent example of this dynamic in action.

4. CARROT & STICK IN THE BIG APPLE

New York City has a tortured history with community policing programs. Like many departments across the country, the NYPD experimented with new methods in the rebellious 1970s, including team policing under Commissioner Patrick Murphy. In 1984, Commissioner Benjamin Ward established the Community Patrol Officer Program (CPOP), the city's first community policing effort, after the police

murder of Eleanor Bumpurs and a wave of protests. Under CPOP, "problem-solving" was delegated to a specialized group of officers, who liaised with local businesses and community leaders. Many rank-and-file officers mocked CPOP officers as feminine "CMOMs", and viewed the units as career dead-ends. Nevertheless CPOP was expanded from a pilot program to a citywide initiative. There were over 4,000 dedicated community policing officers in NYC by the early 1990s.

Community policing was soon used as an excuse to grow the NYPD. Liberal mayor David Dinkins expanded community policing efforts in the early 1990s with his "Safe Streets, Safe City" initiative, which proposed to add 6,000 more police to the force for neighborhood foot patrols, paid for through increased city property and income taxes. Community policing required more cops, it was argued, because officers had to spend time building relationships in small foot-patrol territories, and so more cops were needed to cover the same area. Liberals rushed to embrace the plan: the New York Times editorial board cited Dinkins' initiative when it endorsed him in the 1993 mayoral race against Rudy Giuliani.

It was Giuliani, however, who won the election. He was helped along by police discontent, after several thousand officers rioted outside City Hall to protest Dinkins' embrace of community policing and civilian oversight.⁴ Once in office, Giuliani took the 6,000 cops but abandoned the rhetoric of community policing, putting the manpower to work in other ways: his new police commissioner, William Bratton, channeled the officers towards stop-and-frisk and other harsh "broken windows" tactics. Liberal community policing had paved the way for conservative repression.

The story repeated in 1996, when the city faced an especially drastic budget shortfall. To make up the difference, Giuliani uncharacteristically proposed cutting 1,500 police officers to save funds. Whether this was a ploy to cement his image as a fiscal conservative, or to distance himself from Dinkins' reliance on high staffing numbers, Giuliani did not have to follow through. Instead Charles Schumer, then a Democratic U.S. Congressman from Brooklyn, negotiated for federal C.O.P.S. funds to

4. See McKinley Jr., James C. Sept 17, 1992. "Officers Rally And Dinkins Is Their Target." *The New York Times*.