

# “We Want Guardians, Not Warriors”: The Transformation of the Camden Police Department



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# “We Want Guardians, Not Warriors”: The Transformation of The Camden Police Department

It was a line-in-the-sand moment.

On a steaming-hot afternoon in early August 2008, a drug dealer in Camden, New Jersey, one of the nation’s most violent cities, pulled out a MAC-10 submachine gun and opened fire. His target was another drug dealer, but the bullets sprayed indiscriminately around the neighborhood, sending local residents scrambling for cover. Among the bystanders who heard the gunfire was Brandon Thompson, a four-year-old boy who went running to his mother’s arms for safety. He was just one step away when a bullet slammed into the side of his head, instantly killing him.<sup>1</sup> The young boy, a reporter for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, symbolized the crime problem in Camden, which had twice been “named the nation’s ‘most-dangerous’ city.”<sup>2</sup>

Scott Thomson had been on the job as Camden’s Police Chief for less than a week when he arrived at the scene. A 14-year veteran of the police force, Thomson was aware of the depth of the city’s crime problems, but seeing the young boy’s corpse took his level of concern to another level. The chief reflected, “It still gets me to this day. My son was five, and I’m looking at a lifeless little boy, and it’s not healthy in my profession to do that, but I could not [help] but see my own son. It was a line in the sand moment for me.”<sup>3</sup>

While Thomson’s commitment to curtailing crime in Camden was admirable, and his passion genuine, he faced significant challenges. Thomson was the city’s third police chief in the past five years.<sup>4</sup> None of his predecessors had succeeded in shifting the tide in a city with one of the highest violent crime rates in the country, a murder rate that was higher than that of Honduras, and a per capita income of less than \$12,000 per year. Making matters worse, Thomson had to navigate a challenging political climate, led by union leadership that was inclined to resist him at every turn, as well as intense public skepticism of a white chief in a city that was 96 percent minority. Finally, Thomson would soon have to lead a newly created county police department under circumstances that, as the chief said, “had never been done in modern American policing, particularly in a jurisdiction that was as large and challenged as Camden, New Jersey was.”

Thus, as Thomson set out to change the path of his department and his city, he faced numerous challenging questions. Among them: How would he change the department’s moribund, corrupt culture? How would he develop new policies, systems, and processes to marry cultural reform with technical change to produce new outcomes? How would he navigate the politics (internally and externally) of creating the new county department? How would he deal with pointed adversaries on the police force and in the union? How would he sustain the transformation and position the organization to continue to succeed over the long term?

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1 Interview with J. Scott Thomson, Executive Director of Global Security and Chief Corporate Governance Officer, Holtec International, former Chief, Camden County Police Department, by telephone, November 7, 2019. Hereafter cited as Thomson interview. Unless noted, the data in this case study—including quotations from and attributions to Thomson—come from this interview, other interviews with Thomson, presentations by Thomson at Leadership for a Networked World events at Harvard University, a personal communication by e-mail with Thomson on June 2, 2020, and a case study previously published by LNW about Thomson’s leadership. In particular, see “Hitting the ‘Reset Button’: The Transformation of the Camden Police Department,” An Insight from the 2015 Public Safety Summit, Leadership for a Networked World, available at <https://lnwprogram.org/content/hitting-%E2%80%99Creset-button%E2%80%99D-transformation-camden-police-department> (accessed on December 5, 2019).

2 Allison Steele, “Gunned-down 4-year-old a symbol of N.J. city crime rate,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 5, 2008, available at <https://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/Gunned-down-4-year-old-a-symbol-of-N-J-city-1757407.php> (accessed on December 5, 2019).

3 Emphasis added.

4 During that time, the city also had three police directors.

## An Organization in Crisis

The Camden Police Department had been in turmoil since at least 1998 when, as *The New York Times* reported, “Police Chief William Hill retired abruptly after accusations of fiscal and personnel mismanagement.”<sup>5</sup>, <sup>6</sup> In the ensuing years, the problems of high crime and corruption persisted, leading then-New Jersey Attorney General Peter Harvey to exercise his authority to supersede the organization in 2003. That Harvey took this step spoke to the gravity of the situation: the State of New Jersey had the power to takeover any police department in the state, but it rarely made this move because it was seen as such a drastic measure. In the case of the Camden Police Department, however, state officials—who also sent state police troopers to Camden to help oversee the department—saw no other choice. “Camden was consistently the most dangerous city in America,” explained Anne Milgram, who became New Jersey Attorney General in 2007, “and the feeling was that the police department was not able to keep the city safe.”<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, even after the state superseded the Camden Police Department, the organization continued to struggle, and the city remained unsafe. In November 2005, Camden was named the country’s “most dangerous city” for the second straight year, and in February 2006, the state brought in a police management expert from Florida, Robert Stewart, to oversee the department. That move did not sit well with some police officers and union leaders, who had hoped that someone from within the department’s ranks would be selected to lead the organization. “He’s not a New Jersey resident,” said an official from Camden’s Fraternal Order of Police. “He’s not a certified police officer in New Jersey. So what authority does he have to run the day-to-day operations of the police department?”<sup>8</sup>

## Milgram Takes the Helm

Amid this challenging environment, Milgram took over as Attorney General in June 2007 and began exploring ways to improve the situation. Initially, she sought to develop a clearer understanding of what was actually happening in Camden. Within days of taking office, Milgram, who came from a family of police officers, drove around the city for four hours in an unmarked police car and was shocked by what she saw.<sup>9</sup> When she and the officer she was with stopped, a young boy walked directly in front of their vehicle and did a hand-to-hand drug transaction. “It was such a brazen thing,” Milgram said. “for somebody to walk in front of us and do the hand-to-hand literally in broad daylight when the kid should have been in school.” The Attorney General was equally appalled by what she did not see: there were no officers walking around the city, let alone police cars driving with their windows down, even though it was summer. In fact, in the course of her tour of the city, she saw just one other police car, which was flying down the highway. “There was essentially lawlessness,” Milgram said, “and the fact that there were no cops on the street and that they were just running around in their cars with their windows up meant to me that there was an abdication of responsibility for the safety of the city and that everyone knew it.”

The Attorney General’s level of concern only increased as she familiarized herself with the department’s internal strategy. Not long after her driving tour, she attended a Compstat meeting and was shocked to discover that the

5 Jill Capuzzo, “Camden’s Rankled Ranks,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2006, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/12/nyregion/camdens-ranked-ranks.html> (accessed on December 17, 2019).

6 The problems in the police department were emblematic of broader corruption issues in the city’s government. For example, when the mayor was indicted on corruption charges in 2000, he was “the third Camden mayor to be indicted in the last 20 years.” Iver Peterson, “In Camden, Another Mayor Is Indicted on Corruption Charges,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 2000, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/31/nyregion/in-camden-another-mayor-is-indicted-on-corruption-charges.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed on June 4, 2020).

7 Jeffrey Gettleman, “Inquiry Faults Police and Family in Boys’ Deaths,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2005, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/national/inquiry-faults-police-and-family-in-boys-deaths.html> (accessed on December 17, 2019); Matt Harrigan, “Crime-ridden Camden, N.J., to disband city police department,” *Syracuse.Com*, August 27, 2012, available at [https://www.syracuse.com/news/2012/08/post\\_653.html](https://www.syracuse.com/news/2012/08/post_653.html) (accessed on December 15, 2019); and Interview with Anne Milgram, Distinguished Scholar in Residence, New York University, former Attorney General, State of New Jersey, by telephone, December 12, 2019. Subsequent quotations from and attributions to Milgram come from this interview and a personal communication by e-mail on March 5, 2020.

8 Capuzzo, “Camden’s Rankled Ranks.”

9 Milgram’s father and grandfather had both served as Chief of the South Amboy (NJ) Police Department.

officers were using the antiquated approach of posting yellow sticky notes on a map to track where crimes were occurring.<sup>10</sup> After two hours, there was a wall filled with yellow stickies but, as Milgram said, “We had...virtually no idea where the next crime would happen or how we could reduce crime.” The Attorney General quickly realized that this was emblematic of a much deeper problem. She said, “I saw for the first time that the systemic failure is that without data and without information, a system that’s run really subjectively based on our gut and our instinct, we don’t know what we’re doing. We don’t know whether we’re doing it well. And we don’t know whether or not we can do it better.”<sup>11, 12</sup>

Milgram soon picked up on another problem: there were factions within the department itself that would staunchly resist reform. This came across as she and her team began to observe several anomalous staffing patterns in the department, including, as Milgram said, the “ton of folks on indefinite sick leave” and the existence of a traffic department that appeared to be receiving undue resources in a city with high levels of violent crime. “There were all these things we just couldn’t understand or get information on,” Milgram said, “and there was also resistance within the organization to having us get it.”

Milgram became committed to shifting the tide and to a new strategy: rather than just try to fight crime, she wanted to try to anticipate where crimes were likely to occur and redeploy resources to prevent them from happening in the first place.

## Preparing for Redeployment

Milgram recognized that she would need to implement a multi-faceted strategy to improve the operations of the Camden Police Department and make the city safer. However, she also grasped that the most-important initial step would be measuring where crime was and had been occurring, developing tools to anticipate where future crimes would happen, and mapping how officers were spending their time. If this happened, the department would be able to start to reallocate officers to target the highest-priority areas. But, absent this crucial step, the Camden Police Department would continue to be operating in the dark. “Without that data or basic information...,” Milgram emphasized, “everything felt fuzzy.”

To assist with this redeployment exercise, Milgram turned to Joe Cordero, a 21-year veteran of the New York City Police Department who was then serving as the police director in East Orange, New Jersey. In East Orange, as Governor Jon Corzine noted, Cordero implemented “intelligence-led policing tactics” that contributed to a 56 percent decrease in violent crime.<sup>13</sup>

Milgram had Cordero devote considerable time to establishing a baseline of information and measures and developing a revamped Compstat system. This was an arduous process: Cordero was going through filing cabinets to get the information for the analysis that would guide the redeployment and also helping the department to craft new measurements. Milgram reflected, “It was like hunting for the data he needed.”

As Cordero worked to reform the department’s Compstat system and develop strategies to redeploy personnel, Milgram simultaneously pursued reforms on other fronts. This included working closely with a local judge who was

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10 According to Mark Francis, a public information officer for the New York City Police Department, “COMSTAT is a process by which crime statistics are collected, computerized, mapped and disseminated quickly.” For additional background, see Jason Brown, “Criminals, Meet COMSTAT,” *Government Technology*, August 30, 2004, available at <https://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Criminals-Meet-COMSTAT.html> (accessed on December 17, 2019).

11 Milgram interview; and “Anne Milgram: How Can Smarter Statistics Help Us Fight Crime?” National Public Radio, January 26, 2018, available at <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/580619944> (accessed on December 17, 2019).

12 Milgram also delivered a TedTalk in which she discussed the use of yellow sticky notes during the Camden Compstat meeting and, more broadly, the importance of intelligently measuring and analyzing data to fight crime effectively. See Anne Milgram, “Why smart statistics are the key to fighting crime,” TedTalk, October 2013, available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/anne\\_milgram\\_why\\_smart\\_statistics\\_are\\_the\\_key\\_to\\_fighting\\_crime?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_milgram_why_smart_statistics_are_the_key_to_fighting_crime?language=en) (accessed on December 17, 2019).

13 “East Orange Police Director Named Statewide Director of Gangs, Guns, and Violent Crime,” Department of Law & Public Safety, State of New Jersey, December 21, 2007, available at <https://www.nj.gov/oag/newsreleases07/pr20071221a.html> (accessed on December 17, 2019).

overseeing the city to secure funds to hire 50 new officers.<sup>14</sup> From Milgram's perspective, this was an opportunity to bring in "young blood, the people who'd never known another system." "It was just much easier," she added, "to get them to go through the brick wall to get things done." At the same time, she took steps to remove the State Police troopers from the city with an eye toward reaching the point where the department would be able to operate independently. Finally, she made it clear that she was willing to listen to the officers themselves, some of whom expressed apprehensions about going on independent patrols in a city that had so much violent crime. The Attorney General agreed that it made sense to have officers deploy in pairs.

Approximately a year after Milgram took office, Cordero finished his foundational statistical analysis, and in a dramatic move, Milgram announced a massive redeployment of personnel. The new strategy was overwhelmingly focused on fighting violent crime. The Attorney General also made it emphatically clear that it would no longer be acceptable for officers to engage in corrupt behavior (e.g., working on a high-paying private security detail and then calling in sick so that other officers could fill in and receive overtime pay). The officers would also have to adapt to less-palatable hours. She announced these changes in a roll-call talk that sent ripples through the rank-and-file. Milgram recalled telling officers:

Look, we want all of you to be a part of this police department, but what we expect is an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. And the number-one priority is keeping the city safe. And if that means that you have to work at three o'clock on Thursday morning, that's the job. And you get to decide, 'Do you want that job?' But that's our mission. And we want you here, and we want to manage everyone to be part of this team. But if this isn't for you, step out.

After carefully studying the challenges in Camden, Milgram had developed a strategy and sent a powerful message that she now understood the situation and was committed to making big changes swiftly. Milgram explained, "We knew if we did just one small change at a time, we would be pushing up against culture, and we didn't think we would be able to reduce crime enough and build ourselves the time and space and frankly the goodwill for additional change."

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14 Along with the police department, the City of Camden was under state control. This arrangement dated to 2002 when "then-Gov. Jim McGreevey gave Camden \$175 million in bonds and loans, plus a one-time \$7.5 million appropriation from the state budget, in exchange for an appointed chief operating officer to run the government and for gubernatorial control over the school board." Matt Katz, "Camden Rebirth: A promise still unfulfilled," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 8, 2009, available at [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20091108\\_Camden\\_Rebirth\\_A.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20091108_Camden_Rebirth_A.html) (accessed on December 18, 2019).

# Thomson Takes Charge: July - August 2008

While developing a stronger sense of crime trends and redeploying officers was critical, another challenge still loomed large: finding someone who could lead the department through this tumultuous period of change. In her first year as Attorney General, Milgram had replaced multiple police chiefs, and in summer 2008, just as she announced the redeployment, she was growing increasingly frustrated with the police chief at that time. Milgram's primary point of dissatisfaction was the unwillingness to dismantle the department's Traffic Unit, which, she believed, had come to symbolize the department's misappropriation of resources when the city was experiencing frightening levels of violent crime. After a six-month period during which she repeatedly requested that the chief eliminate the traffic unit, Milgram finally told the chief that he had a month to dismantle it. He refused. The Attorney General asked for his resignation.

The chief resigned, setting the stage, as *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, for the department's sixth leadership change in as many years. What's more, in a reminder of the stakes of the situation, on the same day the chief resigned, a homeless man was shot. It was July, and Camden had just had its 32nd homicide of the year. The previous year, the city had had 42 total homicides. The department needed leadership.<sup>15</sup>

## Turning To Thomson

Later that day, then-Deputy Chief Scott Thomson was driving home when he received a startling phone call: a colleague informed him that the chief of police had just quit. At first, Thomson did not believe it; he had briefed the chief on the department's investigative operations that morning. However, a quick call to the chief confirmed the news.

About 15 minutes later, Thomson received an even-more astonishing phone call: it was from Robert Lougy, a special assistant to New Jersey Attorney General Anne Milgram. Lougy told Thomson, "The Attorney General wants to see you tomorrow morning in her office in Trenton at 8:00 am, and don't tell anybody you're coming."

Thomson reported to Milgram's office the next day and recalled a dramatic exchange. He said:

I'm 36 years old. I've got 14 years on the job. I am NOT expecting what is about to unfold. I thought I would be briefed on a new investigative strategy with additional state resources and possibly get insight into who the next chief would be. So I was caught flat footed when the Attorney General, who is this dynamic individual...comes walking into the room, looks at me, and says, 'Tomorrow, I am naming you the Police Chief. I don't care what you have to do. The body bags stop piling up. Do you understand me?'

"Yes, ma'am," Thomson replied.

"What are you going to do?" Milgram immediately asked.

Thomson did not have much time to reflect because, the following day, Milgram brought him to a room with elected officials—including the mayor, the city council, and the local state senator—and delivered what Thomson characterized as a "fire and brimstone speech." The chief explained, "She was there as the chief law enforcement officer in the state and putting her full weight and support into reversing the levels of violent crime in this city. At the end of [the speech] she said, 'This is your new police chief. Any questions?'" One of the elected leaders then raised his hand and said, 'Yeah, what's his name?'

Looking back, Thomson suggested that Milgram appointed him as interim chief because of a lack of viable alternatives. He mused, "To be quite frank with you, I literally think the Attorney General looked around the room and

<sup>15</sup> Milgram interview; and Matt Katz, "Camden police chief quits; succession unclear," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 20, 2008, available at [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/local/20080720\\_Camden\\_police\\_chief\\_quits\\_succession\\_unclear.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/local/20080720_Camden_police_chief_quits_succession_unclear.html) (accessed on December 17, 2019).

figured I was the only guy that wouldn't be indicted in the next six months, and we'll just put him in the chair until we can find anybody else."<sup>16</sup>

For her part, Milgram acknowledged that appointing Thomson as police chief involved some risk. Previously, when she had sensed that the previous chief was unlikely to eliminate the traffic unit, she had asked Cordero, who had been working closely with Thomson at Compstat meetings, if Thomson was ready to become chief. Cordero's answer, Milgram recalled, was "he's getting there." However, Milgram strongly believed that Thomson had numerous wonderful qualities and tremendous capacity to lead. "He's humble, and he's smart and works hard," Milgram said. "He viscerally got it...I had a lot of confidence that he would always do the right thing and try to shift the organization." What's more, there was a sense that Thomson and Milgram, both of whom were in their 30's, shared a youthful exuberance and optimism. "We both had ignorance in our favor," Milgram reflected. "You sort of imagine that you can change the world."

Nonetheless, at the time, that the elected leaders did not know who Thomson was spoke to the gravity of the political challenges he would have to confront. Thomson, the youngest police chief in the department's history, elaborated:

The political establishment didn't know me, and they didn't care for me, to be quite frank with you. I wasn't their guy. You have to remember that the city is 96 percent minority, and there are racial tensions that have existed in the city, city politics and the police department for decades. So to have a non-minority for a prominent position forced upon them put me at an immediate disadvantage with them.<sup>17</sup>

## Continuing Reform

After formally being introduced as Camden's interim police chief, Thomson began his work and immediately grasped that he would have to find a way to inject energy and discipline in a lethargic and corrupt organization. Thomson reflected:

I came up in this organization, and I know all the things that were fractured, and I have an idea of some of these things that we need to do, but I didn't have a clear vision of how to do it. I just know that we've got to start holding people accountable. We need to get more people out on the streets, and we need them to start being cops. We need them to start being responsive to the community, we need them to put their actual profession, before their secondary employment. And I needed to address the corruption.

The tragic shooting of Brandon Thompson provided an impetus to initiate this change because it crystallized the community's concerns. Soon after the shooting occurred, Thomson attended a forum with over 100 local residents, and a mother, whose older son had been murdered several years earlier, stood up and voiced her frustration. As Thomson said, "[she] starts to rip me and starts ripping into the police department. She said, 'You cops don't care. All you guys do is drive around with your windows rolled up. You won't even get out of your damn squad cars.'" She then pointedly asked Thomson, "What are you going to do? What are you going to do differently so that I don't have to bury my next son?"

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16 Thomson made a similar comment in an article in *The New York Times*, saying, "They looked at me and said, 'Well, he looks like he won't get indicted in the next six months.'" As the chief recalled, the comment was selected as the paper's "Quotation of the Day." Thomson interview; and Joseph Goldstein, "Changes in Policing Take Hold in One of the Nation's Most Dangerous Cities," April 2, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/02/nyregion/camden-nj-police-shootings.html> (accessed on December 11, 2019).

17 Thomson added, "Camden was a city that had race riots in the '60s and '70s, and they were precipitated by white cops beating Hispanic and African American youths. The city department was very racially polarized." For additional background on these riots, see Alfonso Narvaez, "1 Killed, 2 Shot in Camden Riots," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1971, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/1-killed-2-shot-in-camden-riots-mayor-declares-emergency-after-2d.html> (accessed on December 10, 2019); James Markahm, "Curfew Is Continued in Quiet but Riot-Torn Camden," *The New York Times*, August 23, 1971, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/23/archives/curfew-is-continued-in-quiet-but-riottorn-camden.html> (accessed on December 10, 2019); and Shoshana Guy, "America's 'invincible' city brought to its knees by poverty, violence," NBC News, March 7, 2013, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/in-plain-sight/americas-invincible-city-brought-its-knees-poverty-violence-v17225824> (accessed on December 10, 2019).

The exchange struck a chord with Thomson. He later said:

It still resonates with me to this day. At that point in time, I did not care about my level of popularity. I didn't care about past precedent. I didn't care about contracts. I cut 100 transfer orders and immediately pushed everybody out on the street... I shut down functions of the police department, such as permits...[and] clerical functions.... I said to myself, 'I've got four-year-olds being murdered on my street; that's a greater priority than anything else.' So long as things like that are occurring, if you had a gun and a badge you will be on the streets; working nights and weekends, and not behind a desk racing the civilians to the exit door at 4 pm.

## **Facing Opposition**

While Thomson felt that the decision to transfer his personnel out of administrative functions and onto the streets was a logical move (indeed, he believed it was the only viable alternative), he soon faced stiff opposition from entrenched stakeholders who preferred the status quo. Chief among them was the union leadership, who paid Thomson a visit almost immediately after the chief issued the transfer orders. As Thomson recalled, the exchange, while professional, revealed diametrically opposed positions.

"You didn't call me on any of these transfers," the union official said.

"Why should I call you on these transfers?" Thomson responded.

"Well, all of the other chiefs would call me, and basically get my input of whether I thought the transfers were appropriate or not."

For Thomson, this comment helped to crystallize some of the unhealthy dynamics that had previously existed in the department. The union, he realized, had amassed political capital by helping officers find desirable positions in the department regardless of their qualifications or commitment. What's more, previous chiefs would accede to these requests so that the union would not resist them or, as Thomson said, "bad mouth them in the media."

A tense dynamic ensued. The union continued to press Thomson about why he was transferring so many officers to nights and weekends, saying, as the chief recalled, "We can't change anything here." The chief then reminded the union of the tragic murder of Brandon Thompson and the conversation he had with a mother at the recent community forum. The chief asked:

How do I look that mother in the eye and tell her I'm doing everything I can so that she doesn't have to bury her only remaining son left when our cops are working better schedules than bankers? How do I look at myself in the mirror afterwards? I've got a five-year-old at home... I can't imagine putting my son in a coffin, and I don't think anybody else in this city should have to do that. If that means disrupting comfort levels, well then so be it.

Look, if you don't want to protect people, don't be a cop. If you don't want to swing a hammer, don't be a carpenter. If these guys don't want to be in this line of work, I'll help them find something else, but I'm not having mothers burying their sons in this city because guys want to work secondary employment more than being guardians of neighborhoods.

The unions promised to fight against the changes and kept to their word filing more grievances and lawsuits.

# Holding the Line: Fall 2008 – 2010

While Thomson's firmness with the union represented a significant moment, he faced stiff challenges. As an interim chief, his official civil service rank was just a probationary captain, and he was vulnerable if he did not produce results. What's more, achieving positive outcomes would be difficult because, in addition to the recalcitrant union, many officers within the department were apt to resist change. Finally, many community members remained skeptical that Thomson was different from his predecessors. To succeed, he would have to hold and advance the line on multiple fronts.

Thomson began seeking ways to signal to different stakeholders that he was committed to seeing through reform. An opportunity to communicate his commitment to the community came at one of his first public meetings when a resident stood up and described how disrespectfully an officer had treated him. Thomson knew this was a problem, both from his experiences as well as past community feedback. Unfortunately, there had previously been minimal accountability. As Thomson recalled, people could file a complaint, but it typically devolved into a situation where it was the officer's word against that of the resident. "I couldn't stomach it," Thomson said. "I hated the fact that there was no recourse for that. I didn't like the fact that the Lieutenants and Sergeants looked the other way on it."

The chief looked out at the room (which included numerous officers lined up against the wall with their arms folded) and sent a message that he would begin holding officers accountable. Specifically, he announced his cell phone number and asked audience members to write it down. He even held his phone toward the crowd and told them to call the number and watch his phone ring to verify it was his personal number and not some answering service. He told them to contact him personally if they had a problem. "If any of those guys along the wall, or anybody wearing this uniform treats you in a manner that's disrespectful," Thomson said, "I want you to call me personally and let me know about it." Looking back, the chief identified this as a watershed moment. He explained:

That signaled to the community that I was something different, and it also signaled to the cops that a new day had dawned. They didn't like it, but these are also the same people that were working desk jobs, and I'm pushing out on the streets. To the community, I think I was the first person in a very, very long period of time that ever agreed with anything they said.

Still, rooting out the corruption in the department would require more than just dramatic public declarations; the chief also had to confront—and withstand challenges from—the personnel in the department who opposed change. In Thomson's first six months as chief, his colleagues filed 100 grievances and six lawsuits against him. The resistance came from both rank-and-file officers who did not want to have their schedules and assignments changed as well as the more senior leaders. For the most part, the majority of them were shutting down, crossing their arms in resistance, and doing the absolute minimum.

The chief employed several strategies to overcome this hostile resistance. One was creating a new management structure that could help to enforce change. Thomson identified the people in the department, who, as Thomson said, "were mission-oriented people" and made them his Executive Officers. This empowered these officials to run departments and, as Thomson recalled, "walk up to a senior officer and say, 'This is what you're going to do today.'" In most instances, the higher-ranking individual would push back, reminding executive officers that they outranked them. In cases like these, Thomson would follow up and enforce the executive officer's power. The chief would say:

That's my executive officer. The direction the executive officer is giving you is the direction I gave them, which means if you don't follow the direction that the executive officer gives you from me, that's insubordination, and you'll be charged immediately. Either you're going to do your job, or you're going to continue to take orders from executive officers until you decide to do what you're supposed to do.

Thomson's firm stance prompted a range of reactions. There were some officers who, as Thomson said, "just completely shut down." However, the chief also sensed the presence of a "silent majority [that] had been waiting for leadership." Thomson focused in part on helping to lead those officers through what he characterized as "the fog of

war.” Specifically, amid a rapidly changing and at times disorienting environment, he encouraged them to focus on “the commander’s intent.” “There’s a mission and a creed,” the chief emphasized. “The mission is to reduce the number of crimes and make people feel safe, and the creed is service before self. If they’re adhering to that mission in a manner that’s congruent with the creed, then we’re on track.”

## **A Permanent Appointment**

The emphasis on cultural change, safety, and service before self soon began to pay dividends. Most notably, Thomson’s efforts to root out corruption impressed senior officials, including Milgram, who, in 2010, approximately a year-and-a-half after calling Thomson into her office, removed his tag as interim chief and granted him a permanent appointment. Ironically, the intense resistance of some of Thomson’s opponents helped to solidify his standing. “I don’t know what you’re doing,’ Thomson recalled being told, “but if you’re pissing those guys off, you’re doing something right.”<sup>18</sup>

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18 As Thomson recalled, several mentors played an integral role in his professional development during this time. Chief among them were Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey and Chuck Wexler, the Executive Director of the Police Executive Research Forum. Thomson said, “As a very young police chief, I was blessed to have friends who had forgotten more about executive police leadership than I could ever hope to know.”

# “The Axe Falls”: 2011 – 2013

Although Thomson had done enough to secure the position of permanent police chief, he was just scratching the surface of the reform that needed to occur to effect lasting change—a point that came into sharp relief in 2011 when the department lost 46 percent of its officers in a single day. The reduction—which occurred against the backdrop of a dire fiscal situation—resulted in the layoff of everyone who had been at the department for less than 15 years and the demotion of 70 percent of the staff that had been retained.<sup>19</sup> Amid this challenging climate, the extraordinary decision was made by the mayor and city council to eliminate the city’s police department and replace it with a county force created by the county freeholders with which the city would contract through a shared service agreement.<sup>20</sup> All levels of government, from Governor Chris Christie to County Freeholder Director Louis Cappelli, Jr. to Camden Mayor Dana Redd, worked together to establish a new public safety paradigm in Camden. “This was not a merger, this was not an acquisition,” said Thomson. “It was the abolishment of one department and the creation of another at the exact same time. It was an extremely bold and courageous political decision by the elected leaders.”

The move was stressful and contentious (opponents depicted it as a union-busting scheme).<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, amid this enormous difficulty, Thomson saw an extraordinary opportunity. In the establishment of an entirely new organization, he saw an opening to establish a new vision, optimize organizational design, and create a culture focused on community safety. “Seldom in life do you ever get an opportunity professionally or personally to hit the reset button,” said Thomson, “and this was one of those opportunities.”

The opportunity to “hit the reset button” began with recruitment. In dissolving the police department, the existing union contracts were also eliminated. With savings across the board, the new force could hire 401 officers instead of 250, as well as bring onboard new civilian staff, and new crime-fighting technology. That is a recruiting challenge for any city, but for Camden—a city where distrust of police endured despite Thomson’s initial, impactful outreach—it was an inflection point.

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19 According to Milgram, Camden (along with Newark) had been receiving “distressed cities aid” in the state budget. This amounted to tens of millions of dollars, and it was suddenly cut off.

20 The Freeholders in Camden County, New Jersey “are empowered with a broad scope of authority, some of which is designated to them by the State of New Jersey. The Board has many diverse and important responsibilities, including both legislative and executive functions. A primary duty entails the adoption of the annual fiscal budget for Camden County’s 37 municipalities and all of the County agencies and services.” For additional details, see “About the Freeholder Board,” Camden County, 2019, available at <https://www.camdencounty.com/about-the-freeholder-board/> (accessed on December 18, 2019).

21 Mike Maciag, “Why Camden, N.J., the Murder Capital of the Country, Disbanded Its Police Force,” *Governing*, June 2014, available at <https://www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/gov-camden-disbands-police-force-for-new-department.html> (accessed on December 15, 2019); and John Rudolf, “Chris Christie Pushes Camden Police Force to Disband, Despite Questions Over New Plan’s Finances,” *Huffington Post*, November 19, 2012, available at [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chris-christie-camden-police\\_n\\_2025372?test\\_ad=evaluate\\_mobile\\_moments](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chris-christie-camden-police_n_2025372?test_ad=evaluate_mobile_moments) (accessed on December 22, 2019).

Before recruiting new personnel, Thomson and his team sought input from community members about what they were looking for in the force. Focus groups revealed that priorities were officers who were empathetic, non-judgmental, caring, and community-oriented. Thomson looked for those qualities in hiring; he also made a point of actively recruiting minority officers (87 percent of the initial applicants were white males, but thanks to Thomson's efforts, approximately 40 percent of the recruits were minorities); creating advertisements that depicted officers in community-building activities (e.g., speaking to kids, neighborhood residents, and the elderly); and above all communicating to new hires the importance of working with the people of Camden. "I'd say," Thomson recalled, "Listen, if you're coming here because you want to be a crime fighter, because you hear of our crime statistics and think you can 'kick butt and take names,' I will personally fire you." "We want guardians, not warriors," Thomson said. "We would be community builders before we were crime fighters."<sup>22</sup>

Once the county police force was stood up on May 1, 2013, Thomson reinforced the message he had communicated during recruitment by taking steps to cultivate a community-oriented culture in the new force. One was augmenting the traditional police officer's oath of office by adding to this solemn promise the language he had previously used with his officers about "service before self." He then made sure to incorporate that notion into all of the department's communications and even had it emblazoned on officers' badges. Finally, the chief adjusted the metric of success in a way that was designed to facilitate culture change. Traditionally, police departments focused on enforcement measures (e.g., arrests made and tickets issued); Thomson, however, encouraged his officers to adopt a very different approach. He recalled saying to officers, "I'm going to start with a very simple standard. When I drive down the street, I want to see children riding their bikes and people sitting on their front steps. Arrests and tickets don't get people to leave their homes; community policing does."

This new metric of success represented a significant cultural shift because it required officers to alter the mindset that had been instilled in them dating back to their time at the police academy. Thomson said, "It was reconfiguring all of that wiring within them and then putting in systems which would constantly reinforce that thought process to develop those pathways." The collective effect, Thomson believes, was a powerful and consistent message that "resonated" with people and which has been paramount to the organization's transformation. "Without culture," Thomson explained, "nothing else follows."

And in case the metaphorical rewiring of the department had not fully communicated Thomson's commitment to creating a brighter future, he also found some literal rewiring that could communicate this change as well. When the new sign for the Camden County Police Department arrived, he replaced the lightbulbs for the old sign with new ones that were at least twice as bright. Thomson recalled, "It just lit up the whole parking lot, and that night, cops just kind of stopped and stared at it and tried to make sense in their head of what's next. They thought, 'If that sign is being changed, then this is real. It's happening.'"

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22 There is a long history of policing experts discussing the notion that police should be guardians, not warriors. One of the most influential leaders on this subject is Sir Robert Peel, a former British Prime Minister who was responsible for (among other accomplishments) setting up "the first disciplined police force for the Greater London area." Known as the "founder of modern policing," Peel once said, "The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions." Norman Gash, "Robert Peel," Britannica, available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Peel> (accessed on December 15, 2019).

# Reform of Structures, Systems, and Processes: 2014 – 2017

Even as Thomson gave strong signals about the cultural change he hoped to instill, it did not guarantee that the new approach would take hold. As the chief recalled, the transition from the city to the county force had been extremely controversial. “You could cut the tension in the air with a knife,” said Thomson.<sup>23</sup> It was important for the chief to create structures, systems, and processes to reinforce the cultural change that he was espousing. Thomson started with a major strategic change: increasing the proportion of an officer’s time spent in communities building trust and relationships as opposed to handling radio assignments. In most mid-size police departments, Thomson explained, about 20 percent of a department’s uniformed officers are assigned in a community policing capacity (e.g., walking in communities and engaging with residents), and the other 80 percent of the force respond to the demands of calls for service. The new Camden County department nearly inverted that ratio, devoting 30 percent of officers’ time to traditional service-driven Patrol Divisions and the other 70 percent to community policing’s Neighborhood Response Teams. By 2017, the Patrol Division was completely eliminated for department-wide community policing.

The latter groups did not just drive through communities in patrol cars; on Neighborhood Response Teams, officers walked the streets, rode their bikes, and knocked on doors. This enabled the police department, as Thomson noted, to increase its “street-presence” as much as five-fold, depending on the time and day. It also created the circumstances under which Thomson’s force could build relationships with and demonstrate its service orientation to residents; even more important, it helped the department prevent crimes from occurring rather than responding after the fact. As Thomson said, “Often the difference between something bad happening or not is the presence of a guardian figure.”

Of the broader relationship between the police and the community, the chief added:

The people in the neighborhoods didn’t trust the cops, and, unfortunately, some had good reasons for why they felt this way. So, the only way were going to build trust was not going to be from the chief giving good speeches at community meetings, it’s going to have to be through positive human contact by the cops themselves on the streets with the people of that neighborhood.

This significant change in how an officer’s time was structured set the stage for other important structural, technological, and policy shifts. One structural change was outsourcing select service personnel, including crime-scene technicians, the information technology specialist, and intelligence analysts. This helped the department to decrease costs with better-skilled professionals (the consultants were about 20 percent cheaper than full-time staff); it also made it easy for Thomson to reprogram personnel who did not embrace the department’s guiding ethos.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Thomson implemented interwoven policy and technological shifts. From the chief’s perspective, efficiency was imperative: it demonstrated to residents that their resources were being used appropriately and that officers were doing everything they could to protect them. To that end, after noticing enormous variation (anywhere from 20 to 90 minutes in how long it was taking officers to respond to a typical call for service, Thomson conferred with the command staff and established policies for calls based upon analysis and consensus. This then served as the baseline to measure an officer’s day. He also used analytics to track and measure how officers were spending their time and established a digital dashboard that enabled him to track the units and personnel out in the field from both a macro

<sup>23</sup> As Thomson noted, much of the tension stemmed from the fact that union leaders actively discouraged police officers in the city police force from applying to the new county police department. The reason was that if no one from the city force applied, it would be nearly impossible to staff the new county department. Eventually, it became clear that the new county force was in fact being created, and only a small percentage of city officers declined to apply.

<sup>24</sup> Thomson also used the fresh start to reinvent his relationship with the union leadership, who shared a common vision for safer, better, community-oriented policing. Thomson then spearheaded a collaborative effort involving the police union, the New Jersey American Civil Liberties Union, and the Police Project of New York University to develop a progressive, nationally recognized Use of Force and De-Escalation policy. Rebecca Everett, “Camden police launch strict ‘last resort,’ use-of-force policy. County wants it to be national model,” NJ.Com, August 23, 2019, available at <https://www.nj.com/camden/2019/08/camden-police-launch-strict-last-resort-use-of-force-policy-chief-wants-it-to-be-national-model.html> (accessed on June 4, 2020).

and micro perspective. The result was a team that was not just committed to serving the people of Camden but one that was equipped and incentivized to do so.

As the organization became more technologically savvy, it continued to update its systems, especially as it related to data management systems. Thomson then sought to update those systems with cutting-edge technology that allowed the department to access more granular data, more quickly. For example, in 2017, the department unveiled a new data management system and a related dispatch system. Developed in partnership with Mark43, a modern company started by students at Harvard and MIT that creates technology solutions for law enforcement organizations, the new systems in Camden leveraged cloud-based data storage and more user-friendly interfaces to increase efficiency. The impact of this technology was critical to the advancement of the organizations' systems for efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. Kerry Yerico, the department's director of strategic intelligence analysis, described how this was an enormous and welcome change from the past. "Navigating the system has always been very complicated, with lots of query-based drop downs. For an officer with limited time, it was not very user friendly at all," Yerico said. "If just one term is off, it might throw off your entire search." More importantly, the new system allowed the department to make even more-informed decisions on how to deploy resources. Yerico elaborated:

We are 100 percent data-driven in terms of our analytics. We rely on data from the minute we walk in to the end of our shifts. Are we seeing increases in violent crime indicators in certain areas? What kinds of calls for service do we see and can those predict a rise in violent crime? Are we seeing heroin overdoses? We try to match up the location where the drug was purchased with drug arrests and where people are coming from. And we look at field contacts. What vehicles have been to this location recently? Who has stopped there? We are always trying to tie together these data sets in order to stay ahead, to be proactive rather than reactive.<sup>25</sup>

The department also deployed cameras and gunshot microphones throughout the city and computers in police cars and outfitted officers with body cameras to capture more accurately what was happening in Camden and in officer-citizen interactions. The data from the cameras and gunshot microphones were transferred back to the department's real-time tactical operational intelligence center, where analysts were able to evaluate the information and give insights back to officers in the field in real time. From Thomson's perspective, this would allow Camden "to run a 'smarter police' operation"; to Thomson, technology was a "force multiplier" in a constrained fiscal environment.<sup>26, 27</sup> He also recognized that surveillance technology had the potential to draw the ire of civil liberties advocates. In part because of this, the department gave residents the opportunity to look at online images from the department's cameras in the community. This meant that citizens could actually help the department monitor crime.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, it reinforced the department's commitment to establishing trust.

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25 Adam Stone, "Law Enforcement Finally in the Cloud," Government Technology, January 12, 2017, available at <https://www.govtech.com/em/safety/Law-Enforcement-Finally-in-the-Cloud.html> (accessed on December 18, 2019).

26 Tanzina Vega, "Is Camden a model for the future of policing?" CNN, June 27, 2015, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/27/politics/camden-police-technology/index.html> (accessed on December 18, 2019); and Tod Newcombe, "Forecasting the Future for Technology and Policing," Government Technology, September 26, 2014, available at <https://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Forecasting-the-Future-for-Technology-and-Policing.html> (accessed on December 18, 2019).

27 In an effort to understand more clearly the connection between health care and public safety, the Camden Police Department also established a data-sharing partnership with three local hospitals. For additional details, see "Camden, N.J., Police to Share Data with Hospitals for Insight into Better Health, Public Safety," Government Technology, January 16, 2015, available at <https://www.govtech.com/public-safety/GT-Camden-NJ-Police-to-Share-Data-with-Hospitals-for-Insight-into-Better-Health-Public-Safety.html> (accessed on December 18, 2019).

28 Jason Laday, "Camden County police video camera campaign lets residents fight crime," NJ.Com, April 28, 2014, available at [https://www.nj.com/camden/2014/04/camden\\_county\\_police\\_launch\\_virtual\\_neighborhood\\_watch.html](https://www.nj.com/camden/2014/04/camden_county_police_launch_virtual_neighborhood_watch.html) (accessed on December 18, 2019).

## Impact and National Attention

By 2015, these reforms had begun to pay dividends. At that point, the average 911-response time was 4.4 minutes (down from as much as 60 minutes before), and crime was way down. Murders had been cut 62 percent, violent crime had dropped 30 percent, and shootings were down 60 percent. Said Thomson, “Where we once had 175 open air drug markets, we’re now down below 40 and continuing to progress.” But more important than statistical reductions was the community’s feeling of being safer. Children were playing and riding their bikes on streets that were once controlled by gangs—a far cry from the day when four-year-old Brandon Thompson was shot. In fact, Camden’s reforms were so successful that the department received a visit from President Barack Obama, who toured the department’s intelligence center, met with community members, and gave a speech about the city and police department’s reform efforts. In the speech, the President lauded the police department’s efforts to improve community relations and reduce crime and described Camden “as a symbol of promise for the nation.”<sup>29</sup>

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29 Heather Haddon, “President Obama Visits Camden to See Reshaped Police Force,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2015, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/president-obama-visits-camden-to-see-reshaped-police-force-1431735713> (accessed on December 15, 2019); and Jonathan Salant, “Obama Calls Camden A ‘Symbol of promise for the nation,’” *NJ.Com*, May 18, 2015, available at [https://www.nj.com/politics/2015/05/obama\\_tells\\_camden.html](https://www.nj.com/politics/2015/05/obama_tells_camden.html) (accessed on December 15, 2019).

# Sustaining Change: 2018 – 2019

In August 2018, Thomson began to consider the possibility of retiring from the Camden County Police Department. At that point, he had served for ten years as Police Chief and, as Thomson said, “wanted to start to think about the next phase [of his career].” To that end, the chief began speaking with friends and advisors to get advice about what he might do next, with an eye toward pivoting to a new position in about a year.

At the same time, even as the chief began to consider his next move, he wanted to make sure that the Camden County Police Department was positioned to thrive long after he left. To some extent, he had been preparing the organization for this transition during his entire time leading the force. Thomson reflected, “I had made a lot of investments in the organization leading up to then to try to strengthen its core competencies and its culture to create systems that would not rely on any one individual, including myself.”

Still, he knew it would be imperative to help identify a strong successor and to prime the culture to continue to innovate after he left. With that objective in mind, the chief increased his interactions with commanders at different levels of the organization and, as he recalled, employed a Socratic method in which he would “answer every question with a question.” In the past, the chief recalled, he would usually answer his team members’ questions directly; now, however, he wanted to stimulate his advisors’ ability to think through these questions on their own. Over the course of the year, he saw their critical thinking skills blossom and, more importantly, that staff at all levels of the organization began to feel more empowered. The chief said, “What I saw was that not only did they come to the answer that I wanted them to, but they often times came to a better answer than I was going to give, and then they would own it even more so because it was their idea, and it wasn’t mine.”

In June 2019, Thomson publicly announced his retirement, and his Assistant Chief, Joseph Wysocki, who had served as second command since 2016, was selected as his successor.<sup>30</sup> That October, the Camden County Police Department named its administration building in honor of Thomson in recognition of the significant progress in reducing crime and improving community policing.<sup>31, 32</sup> Among other signs of a successful transformation, overall crime in the city was at a 50-year low, the murder rate had decreased by 60 percent since 2014, and violent crime was down 40 percent. More broadly, there was a sense that Thomson had successfully imbued a new mindset and ethos in his organization. “Community policing cannot be an initiative,” Thomson said. “It has to be a philosophy.”<sup>33</sup>

As the organization transitioned to a new leader, many observers remained optimistic that it would continue to flourish. Milgram reflected, “I feel very bullish about the future of the police department, even with Scott going, because...he built the plumbing and the foundation of the building. He’s got a great legacy.” For his part, Thomson also felt buoyant about the department’s future, and he believed that the key to sustaining that success was for Wysocki and other leaders to employ three core leadership techniques: capacity (identifying a challenge and identifying the requisite resources to solve it, flexibility (being “on the balls of your feet” and able to adapt as needed, and proximity (being close to an issue so that you can be responsive to it). What’s more, all of this had to occur under the umbrella of an identity that was rooted in a culture that reflected a set of shared values and beliefs. The chief concluded, “If you have those attributes in place, you can manage anything in an efficient, effective, and ethical manner.”

30 Phaedra Trethan, “Camden County Police Chief Thomson to retire; led force through change,” *Cherry Hill Courier-Post*, June 14, 2019, available at <https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/local/south-jersey/2019/06/14/camden-county-police-chief-scott-thomson-retire-camden-community-policing-law-enforcement/1453797001/> (accessed on December 21, 2019).

31 Jim Walsh and Phaedra Trethan, “Building named in honor of former Camden County police chief Scott Thomson,” *Cherry Hill Courier-Post*, October 22, 2019, available at <https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/2019/10/22/camden-county-police-scott-thomson-police-administration-building/2452062001/> (accessed on December 21, 2019).

32 Thomson transitioned to a new post as Executive Director of Global Security for Holtec International, an energy technology company.

33 Mike Dougherty, “Camden police, residents credit building trust among community for 50-year crime low,” *KYW News Radio*, January 1, 2019, available at <https://kywnewsradio.radio.com/articles/news/camden-crime-50-year-low-police-and-residents-credit-community-relations-renewed-trust> (accessed on December 21, 2019).



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