



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Walk the Walk: How Three Police Chiefs Defied the Odds and Changed Cop Culture By Neil Gross

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met May 1, 2024 to discuss *Walk the Walk: How Three Police Chiefs Defied the Odds and Changed Cop Culture*. Gross is a sociologist and former police officer in Berkeley, California. This is a book about why police reforms will fail if they don't address what Gross calls "cop culture," which is the way officers perceive their work and relations with citizens.

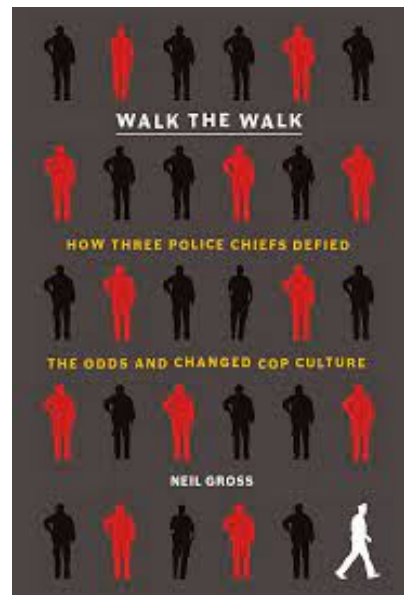
In the book, Gross explains what cop culture looks like and how it is formed. And he tells the stories of three police chiefs who made great progress in changing the culture of their departments—and successfully implementing reforms—and how they did it. One is a police chief in Georgia.

In our discussion of the book, we focused on why police reform is so difficult, where reforms could begin, and the role that outsiders could play these changes.

Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five "big ideas" drawn from *Walk the Walk* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. "Cop culture" is a major obstacle to police reform. And because it consists of attitudes and instincts, it will be difficult to change.
2. When police reform comes, it should borrow heavily from a set of ideas known as "procedural justice," which outlines the way police officers should interact with citizens.
3. Reform will take place inside police departments, but there are roles for outside institutions to play. Among them, they could support studies of police reform in Urban Atlanta and sponsor discussions



among police officials about reform. They could also bring police officers and citizens into respectful conversations about what citizens want and how officers work.

4. We need advocacy groups that show citizens and police officials how law enforcement in Urban Atlanta could be fairer and more effective and identify the practices—and departments—that are leading the way.
5. As the book makes clear, pairing police officers with other professionals—particularly in dealing with mental health or family distress situations—can help de-escalate dangerous incidents and may relieve police officers of tasks they are not well suited for.

A Note about Procedural Justice

Procedural justice is a set of ideas about how police officers should treat citizens and offenders. The aim of these ideas, which have been discussed and refined over the past 35 years, is to build public trust in law enforcement.

Gross writes that today's police reformers see in procedural justice four principles that officers should follow in dealing with citizens:

- Be transparent about what you're doing and why.
- Give citizens an opportunity to speak and be heard.
- Prioritize fairness.
- Remain an impartial decision maker.

Why Do These Things?

Gross's book makes the case for centering police reform around the ideas of procedural justice. He also shows us how difficult these reforms will be. Given the difficulties, should we make the effort? We think so. Here's why:

- People support governments they see as legitimate and just. For many citizens, the police are the everyday embodiment of government. So improving the interactions of police and citizens is good for all local governments.
- Public support also makes law enforcement more effective. Citizens cooperate with those who treat them fairly.
- As trust grows and citizens help the police do their jobs, crime declines.
- If there were regular conversations between citizens and police officers, it could open the door to new forms of cooperation and problem solving. For example, police officers could ask citizens to do things that could help them.
- Excessive and unfair policing runs the risk of social unrest and violence.
- Particularly if combined with other professionals being involved in some cases, these changes could make police work less stressful and more rewarding for officers.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes create opposition. That's true even for something as desirable as police reforms that build greater public trust. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- People feel threatened when the status quo is challenged. Many police officials and officers may feel threatened by these changes.
- Given how hard these reforms will be and the difficulties of "cop culture," where will support of these changes come from?

- There are many ideas about public safety that aren't true but are widely accepted. We do not have groups or institutions that can help citizens, leaders and police officers see what is true about public safety and what is not.
- Perhaps because of this lack of effective advocacy, political leadership for reform is lacking.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- Good advocacy can explain problems and build support for solutions. For police reform, we need advocates who use data and storytelling to explain police reform, how it is accomplished, why it works and what its results are.
- There's a good bit of turnover in police departments, from the police chief level down to patrol officer. This gives mayors and police chiefs who are committed to reform an opportunity to hire and promote officers who support procedural justice ideas.
- While leadership for change is lacking in Urban Atlanta, there is widespread discussion of police reform around the country—and support for it. As the book makes clear, reform-minded police chiefs are finding ways of changing their departments.
- There will be opportunities. Mayors and city managers need to recognize the opportunities for reform when they present themselves.
- One of the most powerful tools for reform could be respectful conversations between police officers and citizens. This could open many minds.

A Synopsis of *Walk the Walk*

Walk the Walk: How Three Police Chiefs Defied the Odds and Changed Cop Culture is 247 pages, not including notes, acknowledgements and an index. There are 14 chapters, grouped into three parts plus an introduction and conclusion.

Gross is a professor of sociology at Colby College in Maine who has taught at Harvard and Princeton. After college and before attending graduate school, Gross was a police officer in Berkeley, California.

This is a book about why police reforms can fail if they don't deal with what Gross calls "cop culture," the attitudes officers develop about citizens. In the introduction, he cites a federal report written after the 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri that set out one reason police reform was so difficult. "There's an old saying," the task force said. "Organizational culture eats policy for lunch."

At the book's center are stories about three police chiefs who made great progress in changing the culture of their departments—and implementing other reforms—and how they did it.

The cities could not be more different: working-class, struggling Stockton, California; rising Longmont, Colorado, not far from Boulder; and a mill city with a troubled racial history, LaGrange, Georgia. But the reforms the chiefs sought were similar. They included de-escalation (basically, attempts at calming potentially violent situations before taking physical measures); respectful encounters with citizens, including those who may have broken the law; and partnerships with community groups that can help with ethnic divides. Above all, officers should remain calm and fair.

All of which sounds good . . . on paper. But will police officers follow these rules as they respond to domestic-abuse calls, robbery attempts and traffic stops? Or will they see them as meaningless "window-dressing," things you say to politicians, reporters and community groups—as you continue with the old ways. If so, culture has eaten policy for lunch.

And what is this culture? Seeing the world as “us” (the police) and “them” (everybody else). It’s an embattled world view that comes from the work, Gross explains, which sometimes involves violent, dangerous encounters. Like soldiers in combat, these incidents produce stresses that police officers feel no one other than another cop could understand and is one reason researchers find people in law enforcement have few friends outside of police ranks.

There’s more. A longtime observation of police culture is that officers sense a lack of respect from those they deal with and feel the need to coerce the respect that’s missing. “These are . . . basic occupational values,” a sociologist who studied officers in Gary, Indiana wrote in 1953.

De-escalation? Respectful encounters? Calmness and fairness? These sound good to those on the outside, some officers say, but won’t work when you’re dealing with a gang member . . . or someone pulled over for reckless driving who is intoxicated and armed.

This makes reform sound impossible. And it would be except for three things, Gross says.

First, police officers are individuals and many join law enforcement with ideals and a sense of fairness. Some lose their idealism over time, but many do not. “In police agencies individualism is what allows cultural variation to take root,” Gross writes. As a result, cultural change in a police department depends greatly on who is hired, who stays, and who is promoted.

Second, a clearly articulated philosophy and a determination to have it followed can change cultures. And police reformers have such a philosophy today that’s based in “procedural justice.” It stresses the importance of treating people respectfully, from victims and complainants to witnesses and suspects. Why? Because it builds trust, and citizens who trust the police will cooperate more wholeheartedly with them. This makes an officer’s job easier.

Third, police chiefs play an outsize role in reform. If a chief is fully committed to reform and skilled in ways of dealing with cop culture, over time she can turn an “us-versus-them” culture into an “us-AND-them” culture.

Gross’ book shows us how this worked in three cities. What’s interesting is how these three chiefs came to similar conclusions about police reform from such different paths.

Eric Jones grew up near Stockton, California and joined the Stockton police department right out of college. He worked his way from beat cop to sergeant, assistant chief and finally chief in 2012. He got the chief’s job just as the city was in deep financial trouble (it declared bankruptcy and laid off or forced into retirement nearly a quarter of its police force) and faced a frightening homicide rate.

Mike Butler grew up in a Cleveland suburb, a long way from Longmont, Colorado. When he was in college, he landed a job with the FBI in Washington and aimed to work as an agent once he earned his diploma. But Butler didn’t like the bureaucracy or the city and decided that he’d rather be a police officer in Colorado. He worked his way to assistant chief in Boulder before the chief’s job opened in nearby Longmont.

Lou Dekmar had an even more round-about road to LaGrange, Georgia. Dekmar was born in New Jersey and grew up in Oregon. During the Vietnam War, he joined the Air Force and became a military police officer. The Air Force sent him to Wyoming.

He stayed in Wyoming in a number of police jobs as he got his college degree. Then, during a training program, he learned that the Macon, Georgia police department had openings. He was hired in Macon, worked his way up in that department and one nearby, then became police chief in the Atlanta suburb of Morrow. When the city manager of Morrow moved to LaGrange in 1995, he persuaded Dekmar to move

with him and change a police department that was so slipshod in its work the district attorney was forced to dismiss many of its felony arrests.

In each case, the chief came to office with a mandate for change and an opportunity. In Stockton, the layoffs and retirements cleared out a lot of officers who resisted change. Longmont's growth gave Butler a chance to build a bigger, better department. And the shoddy ways in LaGrange demanded that Dekmar fire numerous officers and hire new ones.

So each chief was given the opportunity for building a department—or rebuilding one. What did that mean? He could hire people with the right attitudes about law enforcement and promote based on how well they put the principles of procedural justice to work.

In his conclusion, Gross points to the police chief's "indispensable role" in reform. But it's also a hard task, he says. Changing organizations as resistant to change as police departments cannot be accomplished with a mission statement or a few training programs. The reforms and approach to the reforms must be "custom-built" for the department.

Reform also demands four things of chiefs: that they have organizational savvy, communications skills with citizens and officers, humility and perseverance. "These attitudes," Gross adds, "are in short supply among police leaders."

Could outsiders help? To some degree, yes, Gross says. Universities and foundations could help by putting police chiefs in touch with ideas like procedural justice and studying successful police reforms. States and the federal government could offer grants to police departments willing to try new things.

And, he adds, citizens could get involved. Police officers rarely have opportunities to talk with citizens outside of stressful situations. If there were organizations that put cops and citizens in respectful conversation, that could benefit both groups.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define "urbanism" broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.