

The New York Times

In a Room, Police and Youths Talk, and Maybe See Their Similarities



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

White Plains police officers and young men who live in or near the Winbrook Apartments attend a Youth Initiative Training session.

By [FERNANDA SANTOS](#)

Published: June 29, 2007

WHITE PLAINS, June 27 — Like two tribes, they faced each other. One group wore the uniform of their trade: dark-blue outfits adorned with shields and badges, guns tucked in leather holsters. The other donned what could be defined as the uniform of a generation: oversize pants, loose T-shirts, chains dangling from their necks.

Unlike their previous encounters, this meeting at the Winbrook Apartments, the largest public housing complex in this city of 57,000, was not rooted in confrontation. Instead, a dozen police officers and an equal number of young men who live in or near the housing project convened for an exercise in understanding. The notion was that through frank conversation laced with street bravado, they might learn what makes each other tick and figure out how to avoid the flare-ups that define their interactions on the streets.

“I’m starting to get the feeling that we’re all just people,” Davon Melvin, an 18-year-old with reddish-brown hair and doe eyes, said as he ambled across the room.

The meeting was part of a two-week program, called Youth Initiative Training, begun here last year after a spate of violence around Winbrook, its \$10,000 cost covered by a grant from Westchester County and money forfeited in drug raids. Similar sessions, run by the North American Family Institute, a social-services agency based in Massachusetts, have taken place over the last few years in Baltimore and Boston, and more recently in Yonkers.

In this suburb 30 miles north of Midtown Manhattan, where condominiums and office towers are fast replacing old downtown structures, gentrification has given rise to tensions between well-to-do newcomers and low-income youths whose homes lie in the shadow of the building boom. The officers

said they felt stuck in the middle, often summoned to shoo away teenage boys who stand around jostling one another on weekends outside City Center, a downtown mall at the base of two Trump towers, anchors of the local redevelopment.

“You have kids coming out of the projects who dress like urban kids and act like urban kids, and you have suburban families, and that has created a police issue, a flash point,” the city’s public safety commissioner, Frank G. Straub, said in an interview. “We’re trying to teach cops and kids to drop the warrior mentality. It’s not like they’ll meet on the street and give group hugs, but we hope they’ll be able to de-escalate the conflict, whenever and wherever it arises.”

At first glance, the group of officers, who are mostly white, and the youths, all of them black, seemed to have little in common. But soon similarities bubbled to the surface.

Officer Edmund Kearny, 28, who joined the police force here in May after two years patrolling the Bronx, said he worked one summer as a janitor, which happens to be the summer job that Joshua Williams, 17, has lined up this year before returning to White Plains High School as a senior.

Officer Jason Lacayo, 25, who also came here from the New York Police Department, said he grew up in the Bronx and had friends who were in gangs, which prompted Derrick Ephraim, a bucktoothed 19-year-old, to confide that he was once in a gang himself.

“It’s good to interact when the cops don’t have their guards up,” said Mr. Ephraim, whose nickname, D Eagle, derives from the semiautomatic pistol Desert Eagle.

Over pizza and soda, the officers, who patrol the downtown area, and the young men, half of whom have been arrested or have served time in jail, talked candidly for five hours about baseball rivalries, college plans and the difficulties they face on the job and at home. Some of the young men had been referred to the program by the courts as a condition of their release; others had been enlisted from the city Youth Bureau’s job training and educational programs.

“We’re not cops all the time,” said Officer Michael Perry, 40, a former police officer with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection who has worked here for five years. “This is just our uniform, our job. We’ve got to pay the bills.” Then Mr. Perry turned to one of the young men and said: “Remember: I treat you how you treat me.”

This group was the third to participate in the program in White Plains. Each group of youths met every weekday for several hours a day over two weeks, talking about poverty, trauma and domestic violence, and sharing their views about the police, who joined them for the last few sessions.

“The goal is to help them help themselves, and to show them that they can have a bright future, and that there are people who care about them,” said Joseph M. Delfino, the mayor of White Plains.

Results are hard to measure, but Commissioner Straub said the program had played a role in the small decline in crime and other disturbances at the Winbrook housing complex over the past 12 months. There were 169 complaints from residents about noise and disruptive behavior during that time, down from 194 in the previous 12-month period. Complaints about potential illegal activities, like drug dealing, fell to 152 from 199.

Over all, reported crime in the city has decreased by nearly 39 percent over the past five years, according to the city’s police statistics.

A rookie officer, Kristin Faulkner, 24, who took part in the youth encounters this week, said “only time will tell” how much the program would help cool tempers when real confrontation ensues. “But it was good to talk to the kids, you know?” she added. “They opened up to us, they saw we’re human and their attitude changed. In a good way.”