## Policing Cities: Reducing Violence and Building Communities
*By Frank Straub, Commissioner of Public Safety, White Plains, New York*

For many inner-city residents today, an obsession with maintaining "street cred" has made killing a legitimate response to the most minor snubs and slights. "The violence," according to criminologist David Kennedy, "is much less about drugs and money than about girls, vendettas and trivial social frictions. The code of the street has reached a point in which not responding to a slight can destroy a reputation, while violence is a sure way to enhance it."[1] Poverty, a lack of opportunity, disrupted families, and hopelessness exacerbate the street ethos that is driving a nationwide surge in youth violence. In poor African American neighborhoods, homicide is ranked among the three leading causes of death among young men.

Police executives must take the lead in reducing street violence as well as shaping the broader social context through nontraditional policing strategies that restore stability in the hardest-hit neighborhoods. In a 2001 civic report, *Do Police Matter? An Analysis of the Impact of New York City's Police Reforms*, prepared for the Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, criminologists George L. Kelling and William H. Sousa Jr. wrote:

*We have no doubt that in some neighborhoods, changing drug use patterns and family values have had an important impact on local crime reduction. Likewise, in some neighborhoods, the number of youth can have an impact on level of crime. Indeed, all of those factors that can have an impact on crime &endash; demographics, drug use patterns, imprisonment rates, prosecutorial and court policies, weapon availability, and so on &endash; can and do have an impact on crime levels. But the strength and direction of their impacts is always dependent on the local context &endash; and police, by their activities, can help shape that strength and direction.[2] [emphasis added]*

White Plains, New York, is a city typical of many in the United States. In 2000, White Plains began to redevelop its downtown, replacing shuttered storefronts and vacant lots with luxury condominiums, 44-story residential and office towers, exclusive retail stores, pubs, and restaurants. In seven years, the city has added more than 4,000 new residents, bringing the racially diverse urban population close to 60,000. During the day, the number of workers and shoppers more than quadruples, with an estimated 250,000 people circulating on city streets.

Downtown White Plains, like commercial districts in many cities, has rapidly become a study in contradictions, a place where the rich mingle with the poor, where a Ritz-Carlton hotel is only a few blocks away from the city's public housing complexes. Factors that drive crime and violence in other locations&endash;poverty, unemployment, drugs, guns, and gangs&endash;affect crime in White Plains as well. During the past six years, the White Plains Police Department has implemented a series of initiatives that have reduced serious crime and violence. However, crime statistics tell only part of the story. The other part describes how the department is using nontraditional programs to disrupt street violence, help convicted criminals reenter the community, and improve police-community relations.

**Recent Trends in Urban Violent Crime**

A 2006 report by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), *Chief Concerns: A Gathering Storm—Violent Crime in America*, underscored U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) findings that violent crime increased across the United States in 2005 and 2006, reversing the significant decreases achieved during the previous 12 years.[3] In some cities such as Boston, Massachusetts; Cincinnati, Ohio; Cleveland, Ohio; Newark, New Jersey; Orlando, Florida; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, homicides had increased by 20 percent or more during that two-year period. In most cities, the majority of the homicide victims were young African American males. The murder rate for African Americans is more than three times the national average: 19 African American murder victims per 100,000 people, versus just 5 per 100,000 for the general population. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 77 percent of African American victims of homicide in 2005 were killed with a firearm.[4]

A follow-up PERF study, *Violent Crime in America: A Tale of Two Cities*, published in November 2007, reported that although some cities had begun to reverse the trend, violent crime continued to increase in other jurisdictions.[5] The FBI's preliminary crime report for the first six months of 2007 indicated that murder rates jumped 4.9 percent in metropolitan counties and 3.2 percent in cities with 50,000 to 99,999 inhabitants, two categories that apply to White Plains. Of the 168 police departments surveyed by PERF, the highest-ranked factor contributing to violent crime was gangs, followed by juvenile crime. According to Mayor R. T. Rybak of Minneapolis, Minnesota,

*One of the main drivers [of crime]—certainly in our case, the main driver—was the increase in violence committed by juveniles . . . who had far greater access to guns, juveniles who were far more willing to pull the trigger, juveniles who were less connected to traditional gangs and were more connected to arbitrary gangs. All of that led to a much more chaotic experience out on the streets.[6]*

Nearly two-thirds of the surveyed police departments tied impulsive violence, "disrespect," unemployment, poverty, and prisoner reentry to the rise in violence.

**Winning the "War on Crime"?**

In response to the surge in violent crime, and the public's demand for quick, impressive action, many police departments have moved away from community policing, relying instead on traditional law enforcement strategies to fight crime. Tactical enforcement teams, "stop-and-frisk" initiatives, neighborhood sweeps, civil injunctions, and public housing "bar outs" have been used to target and reduce violent crime. In times of perceived crisis, police and political leaders have declared crime emergencies, increasing patrols in hard-hit neighborhoods, establishing curfews, and cordoning off neighborhoods to create "safe zones." Closed-circuit camera networks, gunshot detection and location systems, and facial and pattern recognition technology have vastly expanded surveillance capabilities and created police omnipresence.

As a result of the U.S. preoccupation with fighting the "war on crime," a staggering 2.3 million people are now incarcerated in the United States, according to the Pew Center on the States report *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, and about 5 million citizens are on probation and/or parole.[7] More than 1 in every 100 adults is confined in a U.S. jail or prison. For some demographic groups, the incarceration numbers are especially startling. While 1 in 30 men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars, for African American males in that age group the number is 1 in 9. In the poorest communities, as many as 20 percent of adult men are locked up on any given day, and there is hardly a family without a father, son, brother, or uncle who has not been incarcerated. Gender adds another dimension to the equation. Although men still are roughly 10 times more likely to go to jail or prison, the incarcerated female population is burgeoning at a brisker pace. For African American women in their mid- to late thirties, the incarceration rate has also hit the 1 in 100 mark.

The strong emphasis on "law and order," with the resulting increase in incarceration, has torn a hole in the social fabric of many communities. Incarceration breaks up families and disrupts social networks; deprives siblings, spouses, and parents of emotional and financial support; and ruins opportunities for young people to finish school and get jobs. People released from jails and prisons find it difficult to reintegrate into their communities. They are virtually unemployable; find it difficult to secure adequate housing; and suffer from a lack of medical, mental health, and drug treatment services. A street culture has been created among young African Americans in which serving time in prison is normal and even valued. According to

National Public Radio correspondent and political analyst Juan Williams, "in some neighborhoods . . . going to jail becomes a rite of passage for a young male to prove himself."[8] Even more worrying is the sense of hopelessness experienced by young men in the hardest-hit African American neighborhoods, many of whom believe their lives will end in prison or violently on the street.

Communities of color suffer when aggressive and indiscriminant police tactics are imposed as well as when such tactics fail to bring peace and stability to their neighborhoods. Stepped-up enforcement of public ordinances and the use of aggressive stop-and-frisk tactics can increase tension between the police and minority communities, which view such tactics as intrusive, oppressive, misguided, and frequently based on racial profiling if they are not implemented appropriately and monitored closely. The broken windows theory, advanced by Kelling and Wilson,[9] in which the police and the community bring order to public places by addressing quality-oflife issues, has morphed into a zero tolerance strategy, in which the police use fines, arrests, and incarceration to rid neighborhoods of problem persons, frequently disorderly or inebriated people, rowdy groups of teens, panhandlers, or street vagrants.

In some cities, overly aggressive policing has reduced police credibility, particularly in those neighborhoods that need police services the most. Although curfews and "sweeps" are intended to reduce crime and drug activity, the indiscriminant use of these and other aggressive police tactics in communities of color has created and/or reinforced distrust of the police. According to Elijah Anderson, a Yale professor and author of *Code of the Street*,

*In the community the police are often on the street, but they are not always considered to have the community's best interest at heart. A great many residents have little trust in the police. Many assume that the police hold the black community in low repute and sometimes will abuse its members. . . . With this attitude many people are afraid to report obvious drug dealing or other crimes to the police, for fear that the police might reveal their names and addresses to the criminals.*[10]

Although it appears that fostering a sense of trust in the police is difficult in disadvantaged neighborhoods, difficult does not mean impossible. When citizens believe they have been treated fairly and with respect, they tend to grant more legitimacy to the police and are more likely to engage with them in solving issues that threaten neighborhood stability. If police departments hope to move forward, build and sustain community trust and confidence, and build legitimacy, they must admit that the preoccupation with the "war on crime" has done exactly the opposite: it has undermined their legitimacy in communities of color and eroded many of the gains realized through

community policing.

**The White Plains Experience**

In 2006, a series of violent events in White Plains—a gang-related fatal stabbing in March, a fatal shooting in May, two more youth-involved stabbings in September, and a "shootout" in Winbrook, the city's largest public housing complex—brought the realities of street violence to the city. All of the events took place in and around the city's public housing complexes except for the September stabbings, which occurred in the heart of downtown, a few blocks from a new luxury condominium and entertainment complex. The events were driven by street disputes: wearing gang colors in the wrong neighborhood, retaliation for a robbery, a fight over girls, and stares and an exchange of words as two groups of young people faced off in the heart of the downtown area. Although crime had dropped significantly since 2002, the community and the media called for an immediate police response to end the violence and restore order downtown.

In response, the police department increased foot, bike, mounted, and motorcycle patrols in the downtown area. The neighborhood conditions unit (NCU) stepped up quality-of-life enforcement in crime hot spots and in the city's public housing complexes. The intelligence unit identified and focused on high-risk offenders and their "crews." Detectives arrested gang members at the same time the Community Policing Division began conducting home visits with the aim of interrupting the violence. Representatives from the police department and the city's youth bureau met with members of the community, activists, and black ministers who expressed concern regarding the increased gang activity, violence, and conflicts both downtown and in public housing. The meetings were very challenging. Community members demanded that the police department take action at the same time they angrily described conflicts with the police and past incidents that generated animosity and distrust in the African American community.

Following the meetings, the police department and the youth bureau partnered with the North American Family Institute (NAFI), a Massachusetts-based social service organization, to develop and implement a program to reduce violence among the city's youth and improve community-police relations. The NAFI was selected, in part, because it had developed successful programs to improve relations between communities in Baltimore and Boston and recruit police officers assigned to patrol inner-city neighborhoods.

**Youth-Police Initiative**



Figure 1. White Plains Police Officers and youth participants pose after a recent Police-Youth Initiative Program session. Photo courtesy of the City of White Plains Youth Bureau

The first White Plains session of the Youth-Police Initiative (YPI) brought together young African American men from Winbrook and police officers assigned to the NCU to discuss the recent violence, gang activity, and youth-police interactions (see figure 1). NCU officers were purposely selected because their assignments in the public housing complexes and downtown area frequently placed them in conflict-prone situations with the young men. In subsequent training sessions, recruit officers participated as part of their field training, and other sessions matched police officers assigned to neighborhood "hot zones" and the young men and women who lived there.

Through structured presentations, group learning, and problem-solving activities, youths and police officers explore and discuss their values, attitudes, and feelings about race, violence, respect, and policing. They also discuss the choices they have made and the effect those choices have had on their lives. As the stories unfold, youths and police officers frequently find out that they are not that different. For example, during a recent session, the first with young women, a female officer discussed her teenage pregnancy, her relationship with her mother, run-ins with the police, and the experience of being arrested. She discussed how she hated the police as a teenager and believed they picked on her because she was Hispanic. She also told the young women that after she became an emergency medical technician, she saw police officers helping people who really needed their help and eventually decided to become a police officer herself.

A series of role-playing exercises, developed by the participants, provides an opportunity to see how the actions and language of youths and police officers can escalate street interactions. De-escalation techniques are discussed and practiced to build effective communication and to resolve highly charged incidents. The goal is to get both cops and kids to drop the warrior mentality, stop "dissing" each other, and build mutual respect.

Team-building exercises are intentionally held outdoors, in the heart of Winbrook and other public housing complexes, so that residents can see them taking place. This very public demonstration of youth-police interaction has generated significant interest, curiosity, and favorable responses from

residents. For many, this may be the first time they have seen the police engaged in positive interactions with the young men and women who live in the neighborhood. Additionally, the team-building exercises create opportunities for members of the police department to discuss the program, as well as more general police-community issues, with the residents. It has also sent a clear message that the department is trying to improve relations with the community.

The final YPI event is a celebration dinner for the participants, the youths' families, political and religious leaders, and community members to recognize the participants and their success in completing the program. During the dinner, the participants discuss their experiences during the training as well as their plans to continue building effective relationships. About 50 people attended the first dinner, including the participants. By the time of the fourth dinner, held in April 2008, over 200 people attended, and support for the program continues to build among the city's community, religious, and political leaders.

**Step Up Program**



Figure 2. Officer Jeff Park engages in a partnershipexercise with a White Plains Step Up Program participant.
Photo courtesy of the City of White Plains Youth Bureau

There is no single response to youth violence and gang involvement. Long-term solutions require comprehensive, collaborative responses that offer real alternatives, individualized services, support, and mentoring. The White Plains Youth Bureau's Step Up program, based on the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Gang Model Program, is a critical component of the city's efforts to combat gang activity and street violence. At-risk or gang-involved youth (ages 14–21) come into the program in one of three ways. Police officers refer youths to Step Up as an alternative to incarceration or as part of the department's prisoner reentry program. Youth bureau outreach workers identify youths in neighborhood hot zones. And, most recently, some of the young men and women participating in Step Up have recruited their friends. Once engaged, the young men and women receive individualized case management and wraparound services to address such risk factors as truancy, poor school performance, unemployment, fatherhood/motherhood, and drug and alcohol addiction (see figure 2).

The following stories describe the impact that Step Up and the YPI have had

on two of the young men who participated in the programs.

**Derrick:** Derrick, a 19-year-old African American male who lives in the Winbrook housing complex, was recruited to participate in the Step Up program by a youth bureau outreach worker. At that time, Derrick, whose nickname was D Eagle (derived from the semiautomatic pistol Desert Eagle), was identifying with a local Blood set, wearing red clothing, and flying a gang bandana from his back pocket. Derrick, one of the youths involved in the gang-related fatal stabbing mentioned earlier, was arrested and charged with gang assault.

While in jail and after his release, Derrick worked with a Step Up case manager to find a job, and he was subsequently hired by the youth bureau to staff the teen lounge and gym. Currently, the case manager is working with him to help him earn his high school equivalency diploma, so he can apply to college. Derrick participated in the YPI and is no longer involved with a gang.

**Jonathan:** Jonathan is a 20-year-old African American male from the Winbrook housing project. He had a history of dropping out of school, selling drugs, and stealing. As a result, he was barred from the housing project. In 2006, he attended a YPI celebration dinner to "check it out," sitting in the corner with a couple of members of his crew and watching the event. He subsequently became involved in the youth bureau's basketball program and was recruited to Step Up. After being accepted at a local community college, he received financial assistance and enrolled. He will soon receive his high school equivalency diploma and start earning college credits.

**Effectiveness of the Program:** Although there is limited scholarly research regarding the impact of youth-police initiatives, in White Plains, YPI has decreased the number of negative police contacts among youth participants. An evaluation of Step Up in White Plains indicates that the individual risk levels of the program's 95 participants have been significantly reduced and sustained over time, across all areas, by the 12th month of participation. In addition, such youth programs, particularly Step Up, have provided real opportunities for at-risk youth—jobs, mentoring, fatherhood/motherhood skills, and drug and alcohol counseling—addressing many of the underlying causes of youth violence and gang involvement.


**Fighting Crime on All Fronts**

Derrick's story is illustrative of the successes achieved through the police department's prisoner reentry program. This program, the first in Westchester County, assists individuals leaving the county jail and returning to the White Plains community. Every month, a multidisciplinary team led by the police department meets with inmates selected to participate in the

reentry initiative. The team members, representing social service, not-for-profit, religious, and other organizations, discuss the resources they can provide to the inmates: employment, housing, education, mental health, AIDS counseling and support, and fatherhood/motherhood education upon inmates' return to the community. The police department informs the inmates that they must change the behavior that led to their incarceration, and the probation department explains the repercussions of future offending. The team conveys a unified message that the White Plains community is aware of the inmates' pending release, that the community is concerned for them and will assist them in leading productive lives; however, future offending will not be tolerated. Since the program's creation in 2007, the reentry team has met with 88 inmates in the county jail. To date, only 18 of the inmates who participated in the reentry program were rearrested for any offense after returning to the White Plains community.

Six years ago, the White Plains Police Department committed to a policing paradigm that would fight crime on all fronts. On one front, the department uses traditional strategies to target high-rate offenders, their illegal activities, and neighborhood hot spots. On the other, the department's community policing division has taken the lead in developing and implementing nontraditional programs to target the factors that drive crime and violence. In addition to the programs described in this article, the department has worked closely with community, private, not-for-profit, and other government agencies to build highly successful strategies to address domestic violence, assist new immigrants, and provide services to mentally ill persons, particularly those in crisis.

In January 2007, the editorial board of the *Journal News,* Westchester County's largest newspaper, wrote:

*After . . . a series of worrisome crimes last fall, the police did not get defensive, they got to work. They and their commissioner seem determined to face and prevent crime in the city—not let it define it.*

*[The] police have put additional emphasis on what matters to average people. . . . The department is involved in the "Step Up" program, a multi-agency effort to open up mentoring and job opportunities for at-risk youth. And it is committed to keeping police foot and car patrols highly visible.*[11]

During the past six years, serious crime has declined by 40 percent to the lowest level in 42 years. There has not been a homicide in the city since May 2006, and rates of serious crime continue to fall in 2008. The White Plains Police Department did not let a series of violent incidents define the city or allow gang activity to take hold. The department took the lead, adopting a strong approach to ending violence and building effective and sustained partnerships among police, the community, and other government agencies

during the past six years. "Community partnerships," according to a recent IACP publication on gun violence, "are the key to many aspects of successful policing. These partnerships foster a greater understanding of the roles that community members and law enforcement each play in preventing and solving crime. Regular communication and sustained partnerships with community members provide the support law enforcement officers need to combat gun violence, and can also help develop information that can be critical in solving, or preventing violent incidents."[12] In the end, the White Plains policing paradigm confirms that the police matter and that by their actions, enforcement and community building, they can shape and define the factors that affect crime in the local context.