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**Combating Violence
A Community Approach**



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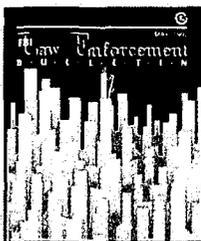
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Cover: This issue focuses on the need for police and citizens to join together to fight the violence that plagues communities across this Nation.

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William S. Sessions, Director

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Violent Crime and Community Involvement

By
LEE P. BROWN, Ph.D.



Every police administrator in the United States recognizes violence as an issue of national concern. Yet, it is a problem that individual police agencies cannot hope to deal with successfully on their own.

In fact, the general epidemic of violence sweeping America goes so deep that leading research institutions view it as a disease. The Federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta reports, for example, that the homicide rate among black males, ages 15 to 24, rose by two-thirds in the last 5 years. Homicide ranks as the leading cause of death among black males ages 15 to 24,

accounting for 42 percent of all deaths in this group. And, firearms are used in 78 percent of these homicides.

Furthermore, the report by the Centers for Disease Control lists a number of contributing factors to these alarming statistics, namely, "immediate access to firearms, alcohol and substance abuse, drug trafficking, poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural acceptance of violent behavior."

It is not only alarming but also depressing that society now tracks and measures homicides by age and ethnic groupings much like medical personnel tracked and

measured diseases like polio and malaria. And, while I'm not a doctor of medicine, I am a doctor of criminal justice. So, I can state with conviction that if the mosquito serves as the agent of malaria, then the illegal gun is surely the agent of homicide.

Public health officials eventually realized that the way to combat malaria was not to swat mosquitos but to drain the swamp. Unfortunately, eliminating the agents of homicide—the illegal guns—presents a more formidable task. For example, although the New York City Police Department (NYPD) confiscated 17,575 illegal guns

in 1990, it is only "swatting mosquitos."

Other States house the swamps, where just about anyone can buy a handgun without much effort. Therefore, controlling guns requires draining the swamps. And that can be accomplished only through tough Federal gun legislation.

At the same time, the other contributing factors to record-setting homicide rates—alcohol and drug abuse, drug trafficking, poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural acceptance of violent behavior—go beyond the borders of any city or State. These issues also need to be addressed in order to combat crime and violence. In this respect, one thing is certain. Local police agencies cannot do it alone. They need to build a partnership with their communities through community policing.

This article¹ addresses how the police need to form partnerships within the community to combat the pervasive violence in America. It also stresses the need for police executives to recognize their new importance in society.

Police-Community Partnerships

Now, more than any other time in the Nation's history, society calls upon the police officer to cope with the collapse of a range of social institutions—a collapse that would have seemed unimaginable to the Nation's leaders of just a generation ago. Today's police officers contend with the debris of social and institutional collapse.

This includes the failure of primary and secondary schools in so many of the Nation's urban centers. It encompasses the collapse of af-

“...in order to get a handle on violence...the police must form working partnerships within the community.”

Commissioner Brown heads the New York City Police Department.



fordable health services and affordable housing. It is marked by a dearth of residential care for people who are severely mentally ill.

In addition, the deterioration of the traditional family structure, the ultimate safety net, contributes to society's woes, with more and more American households headed by single women with children, living in poverty. Without question, the uncertainties and instability that stem from these social and institutional failures make more demands on the law enforcement profession than ever before.

Clearly, in order to make a difference and in order to get a handle on violence or any other serious problem in the community, the police must form working partnerships within the community. They need to use resources other than their own, be they governmental, voluntary, or commercial, to try to resolve some of the recurring problems. Otherwise, police officers function only as incident responders, never getting to the root causes of crime, violence, and fear.

Community policing uses police resources logically and rationally, in a manner that makes a difference. Getting people involved in the community helps them to identify and to solve their own problems. In addition, community policing gives individual police officers a chance to be more creative and independent in their approach to police work and allows them to become problem solvers. More importantly, community policing helps to prevent crime in the first place.

I believe the greater the complexity of social problems, the greater the need for community policing. Unfortunately, some people in law enforcement and government reach the opposite conclusion. And, a primary concern of police administrators is that as crime-related problems grow in severity and complexity, there will be a temptation to revert to the superficial reassurance of the paramilitary response alone.

In fact, as urban conditions worsen, administrators will probably face mounting pressure to abandon community policing and

use the police as a temporary occupying force to put down disturbances. Resisting such pressure becomes a major challenge for police administrators. On the contrary, police administrators should make police officers permanent, highly visible fixtures in the neighborhood, known personally to the people who live and work there.



The New Role of Police Leaders

Along with community policing comes a new role for police leaders, which they must learn to assert. With few exceptions, today's police leaders are better educated and better trained in policing and social problems than their predecessors.

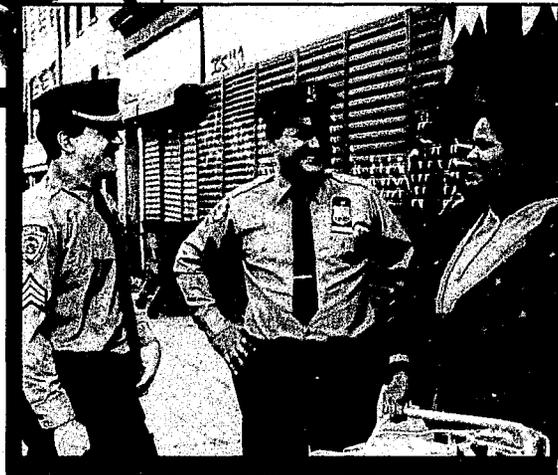
One of the greatest demands placed on police leaders is adherence to values in the face of the collapse of values all around us. Every police officer in urban America today bears witness to that collapse.

They witness it in the utter disregard for human life that begins at so early an age. They witness it in

the murders committed for a leather jacket or just because someone felt like killing that day. This disregard for human life is a direct and a very real threat to society at large, and to police officers, in particular.

There are all sorts of theories behind crime and violence. Some believe that certain people are biologically predisposed to crime—the "born criminal" theory. Others say the social environment causes the problems, while some point to the lack of education or purely economic factors.

Whatever the cause of crime and violence, one thing is for certain—the police do not control the



causes. The police deal with the outcome. In fact, everyone in policing should demand that other leaders in the community address the problems police officers see on the streets. Community leaders must learn that crime and violence are not police problems alone. And the responsibility of educating citizens to that fact rests with police leaders.

At the same time, police leaders must recognize that they alone cannot attack the problem of violence in the community. They should demand that others play a role.

As a rule, police executives have been lax in asserting their primacy in this regard. For too long, they attempted to deal with these problems in isolation. Just as community policing calls for a new role for the beat cop, it also requires a new role for the police chief.

As important leaders in the community, police executives must assert themselves, must demand the respect owed them, and must get the attention they and other police professionals deserve. It works, and it can make a difference.

But, with whom can police leaders work in their fight against crime and violence? The limitations to the list of potential partners know few boundaries.

To combat the kind of violence seen throughout America, police leaders can look to several professional groups. For example, police can work with the clergy in antidrug campaigns, youth programs, and the like. Or, they can enlist the help of public health professionals to learn what they are doing in terms of research and development, such as the work being done at the Center for the Study of Interpersonal Violence at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas. In addition, working with education officials to introduce conflict resolution training in the elementary schools can go a long way in the fight against crime and violence.

At the same time, police leaders should not forget the private sector. In New York City, the police department joined forces with the chief executive officers of some of the world's largest corporations to combat drug use. Police leaders can also recruit the media to become actively involved in the campaign against crime and violence.

Then, there are the social agencies. There is no reason why police leaders should not enlist the help of these agencies to deal with the problems the cops experience on the streets. Using the combined resources of the police department and social agencies can go a long way in addressing the crime problem.

Conclusion

Police leaders must articulate effective approaches to the problem of crime and violence. They must challenge educators, public health professionals, voluntary and social service agencies, corporate leaders, and the media to help combat what is going down on the streets of their cities, towns, or counties. And, they should set the agenda when it comes to legislation, whether it pertains to laws regarding guns, drugs, or the exposure of children to violence on television.

In other words, among leadership circles, police leaders must assert themselves and demand the participation of their communities' resources. That's community policing. That's the way of the future. ♦

Endnote

¹This article is based on remarks delivered by Commissioner Brown at the Violent Crimes Symposium at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia.
