

AT THE CROSSROADS

# Behind the Rise in Gun Violence in New York and Other American Cities

GREG BERMAN

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New York and Other American Cities

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# **At the Crossroads**

What We Know, What We Need to Know



**Greg Berman**

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## **The year 2020 was, by any standard, a tumultuous one.**

In March, the United States went into lockdown as health officials sought to contain the spread of a global pandemic. For a variety of reasons, including its density and diversity, New York City was perhaps the epicenter of COVID-19 in the U.S. in those early months. At night, the air was filled with the sound of sirens, as ambulances brought patients to overwhelmed hospitals throughout the five boroughs. During the day, the intricate street ballet of New York that author Jane Jacobs rhapsodized about ground to a halt. Schools, stores, and other essential services closed, creating enormous hardship for millions. These impacts were felt most keenly by low-income New Yorkers, many of them people of color, whose frontline work making food, caring for the infirm, and delivering packages was deemed “essential.”

The year 2020 was also a presidential election year. Donald Trump, the most polarizing politician in recent memory, was running for reelection. Democrats began the year with dozens of potential candidates, none of whom looked like a solid bet to defeat Trump. Meanwhile, some Trump supporters likely suspected that his low approval ratings—and the fact that he had lost the popular vote in 2016—meant that the race was going to be close. In short, there was reason for people holding a variety of political beliefs to feel anxious about the November election. For many voters, the stakes seemed nothing less than existential.

Then, in May, George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis. This gruesome slaying was captured by a cellphone camera and relayed around the world via social media. Hundreds of millions of people confronted the brutal reality of police violence in the palm of their hand.<sup>1</sup> Many people throughout the U.S. and around the world took to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to racism and police brutality and their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. The turnout was enormous and sustained. In many cities, police responded poorly, making unnecessary arrests and using violence against protesters.<sup>2</sup> In some cities, tensions boiled over, resulting in significant rioting and looting. Images of protest and unrest dominated the nation’s papers and television screens for months.

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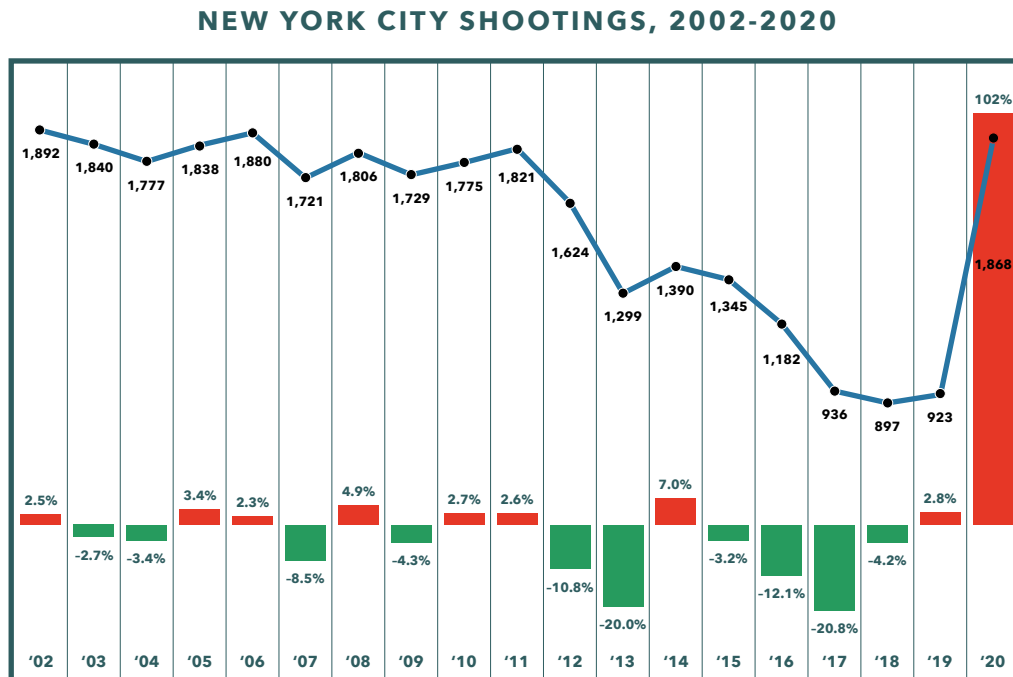
<sup>1</sup> OF COURSE, MANY BLACK AND LATINO NEW YORKERS DID NOT NEED TO BE REMINDED OF THE REALITY OF POLICE VIOLENCE. KIKO GARCIA, ERIC GARNER, ABNER LOUIMA, AMADOU DIALLO, MICHAEL STEWART, ELEANOR BUMPURS...THE LIST OF CASES WHERE POLICE USE OF FORCE HAS SPARKED PROTESTS IN NEW YORK IS LONG.

<sup>2</sup> KIM BARKER, MIKE BAKER, AND ALI WATKINS, “IN CITY AFTER CITY, POLICE MISHANDLED BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTS,” *NEW YORK TIMES*, 20 MARCH 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/20/us/protests-policing-george-floyd.html>

All of this formed the backdrop to the disconcerting news that began to emerge toward the end of 2020: shootings had increased dramatically in New York and other cities across the United States.

This was no small thing. According to researcher John Roman, the 2020 surge was “the largest increase in violence we’ve seen since 1960, when we started collecting formal crime statistics.

We’ve never seen a year-over-year increase even approaching this magnitude.”<sup>3</sup>



BLUE LINE: SHOOTING VICTIMS IN NYC  
RED/GREEN BARS: PERCENT CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR

SOURCE: QUALITY POLICING BLOG -- [HTTPS://COPINTHEHOOD.COM/SHOOTING-IN-NYC-2020/](https://copinthehood.com/shooting-in-nyc-2020/)  
(JANUARY 13, 2021)

Unfortunately, given the unique social and political dynamics of 2020, this increasingly urgent national problem was seen by many through a zero-sum political lens. Some on the right seemed to delight in the violence taking place on the streets of American cities, arguing that it was evidence that liberal criminal justice reforms had undermined public safety.

In return, some on the progressive left responded to the increase in shootings with denial and obfuscation. This generally took two forms: 1) pointing out that, overall, crime was down in the U.S., and 2) attempting to make the case that things were worse in the 1990s. Both arguments

<sup>3</sup> GERMAN LOPEZ, “2020’S HISTORIC SURGE IN MURDERS, EXPLAINED,” VOX, 25 MARCH 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22344713/murder-violent-crime-spike-surge-2020-covid-19-coronavirus>

were factually accurate, but they seemed to be missing the point. As an essay in *The Atlantic* declared: “Progressive Denial Won’t Stop Violent Crime.”<sup>4</sup>

The political atmosphere around crime was intense. And it remains so, making conversations about crime and justice particularly fraught.

In an effort to encourage an open and honest public conversation rooted in data, The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation launched “At the Crossroads,” a series of interviews with leading thinkers about gun violence.

This essay attempts to distill some of the lessons from these conversations. It is divided into three sections:

1. “A Perfect Storm” – A look at some of the forces that may have contributed to the rise in gun violence that began in 2020.
2. “We Need To Do Both” – A review of some of the potential solutions—both law enforcement interventions and community-based prevention strategies—that policy makers should consider as they look to reduce shootings
3. “Science Is Not an Ideology” – Thoughts about the current intellectual climate and the relationship between criminal justice research and policy making

Following the essay are edited transcripts of interviews with the twelve criminal justice experts who participated in “At the Crossroads.”

## A Perfect Storm

The academics and practitioners who participated in “At the Crossroads” all agreed that the increase in shootings in New York and other American cities starting in 2020 is a serious problem that requires a concerted response by both government and nongovernmental organizations. “I think we really need to be concerned,” said Caterina Roman, a professor of criminal justice at Temple University, “I think we’ve reached some kind of a tipping point.”

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<sup>4</sup> ZAID JILANI, “PROGRESSIVE DENIAL WON’T STOP VIOLENT CRIME,” *THE ATLANTIC*, 27 JULY 2021, [HTTPS://WWW.THEATLANTIC.COM/IDEAS/ARCHIVE/2021/07/CRIME-PROGRESSIVES/619569/](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/crime-progressives/619569/)



Richard Aborn, the president of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City, said in April 2021, “I think the expression that we have a ‘problem’ with violence is really an understatement. I think we are now getting close to a crisis of violence. It is obviously well past a blip. The current trend is exceeding the trend from last year, which was already a sharp reversal of the declines from previous periods. So I think we’re in a crisis moment, and I’m very worried about it.”

Community activist Marlon Peterson argued in January 2021 that “we should expect more violence in our communities in the next months.” According to Peterson, “Where we are at, in New York City, harkens back to the late '70s and early '80s in terms of businesses being in shambles, stores boarded up, graffiti everywhere.”

There is no way to say with any certainty why shootings have increased in New York City—too many variables are at work for researchers to be able to document causes and effects with precision. But that hasn’t stopped many politicians and commentators from trying. Dermot Shea, the commissioner of the New York City Police Department (NYPD) through 2021, was adamant that criminal justice reforms—in particular bail legislation that was signed into law in 2019 to reduce the number of people who are detained while their cases are pending—have been responsible for the increase in violence. “Bad policies have consequences,” Shea said. “You have innocent people getting hurt.”<sup>5</sup> Local media also got into the act, tying bail reform to several hate crime incidents.<sup>6</sup> Activists and criminal justice reform organizations in New York have pushed back strongly, arguing that there is no evidence to support the claim that bail reform was responsible for the surge in violence.<sup>7</sup>

According to Peter Moskos of John Jay College, the idea that bail reform has had no impact is “crazy.” “When people don’t get detained, some of them commit crimes,” he said. “I don’t think it’s a huge number, but it’s not zero.” Richard Aborn, while acknowledging that bail legislation and other reforms were “much needed,” also worried there has been a decline in accountability, saying that New York has effectively taken its “foot off the gas” on violent crime.

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5 MANDA WOODS, KEVIN SHEEHAN, AND BRUCE GOLDIN, “NYPD TOP COP CALLS FOR BAIL REFORM IN WAKE OF POST EXCLUSIVE,” *NEW YORK POST*, 10 JUNE 2021, [HTTPS://NYPOST.COM/2021/06/10/NYPD-TOP-COP-DERMOT-SHEA-CALLS-FOR-BAIL-REFORM-AFTER-POST-EXCLUSIVE/](https://nypost.com/2021/06/10/nypd-top-cop-dermot-shea-calls-for-bail-reform-after-post-exclusive/)

6 CEFAAN KIM, “LATEST HATE CRIME ATTACKS SPARK CALL FOR REVISING NEW YORK’S BAIL REFORM LAWS,” *ABC EYEWITNESS NEWS*, 4 MAY 2021, [HTTPS://ABC7NY.COM/HATE-CRIMES-BAIL-REFORM-NEW-YORK-LAW-DARCEL-CLARK/10579699/](https://abc7ny.com/hate-crimes-bail-reform-new-york-law-darcel-clark/10579699/)

7 KRYSTAL RODRIGUEZ, MICHAEL REMPEL, AND MATT WATKINS, “THE FACTS ON BAIL REFORM AND CRIME IN NEW YORK CITY,” CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION, FEBRUARY 2021, [HTTPS://WWW.COURTINNOVATION.ORG/PUBLICATIONS/BAIL-CRIME-NYC](https://www.courtinnovation.org/publications/bail-crime-ny)

Bail reform was hardly the only thing that changed in New York in 2020. Correlation is not causation, of course, but it is difficult to imagine that an event as destabilizing as the COVID lockdown played no role in the rise in violence. Shani Buggs, a public health researcher at the University of California, Davis, argued that what happened was a unique coming together of a confluence of factors:

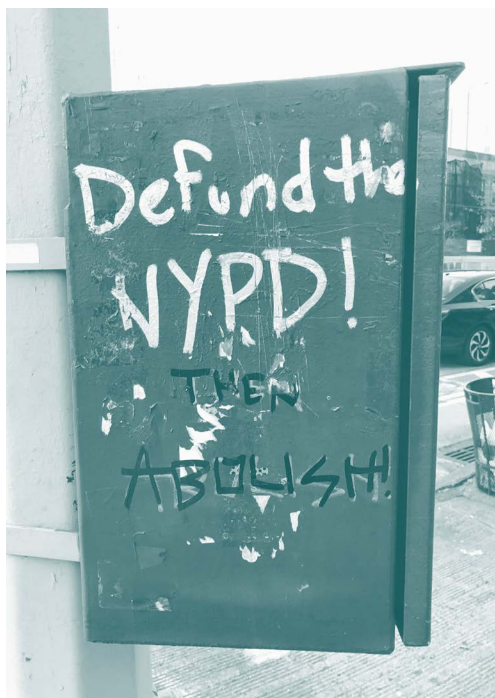
The pandemic and the shutdown severed social ties and economic ties for many individuals. Different from other economic downturns, the pandemic really hit certain employment sectors and certain subpopulations differently. We've seen higher-income positions bounce back better than what we've seen for individuals who are at the lowest rung of economic opportunity and financial stability. And you also had social supports that were basically shut down. Violence intervention strategies were curbed. Job training, subsidized employment, mentoring, case management, financial assistance, social assistance—those were all shut down. And then the fear and anxiety and frustration over the coronavirus and the lack of trust in institutions among communities of color—I think all of those things came together in a perfect storm kind of way.

The details of how COVID played out at the street level are complicated. According to Joseph Richardson, a criminologist at the University of Maryland, “COVID has driven more people onto social media. You have a lot of beefs that are playing out on social media now. We can go back and forth on social media, and if I see you outside it becomes very real. And now it is totally legitimate for me to wear a mask and gloves in broad daylight.”

Jeremy Travis, an executive vice president at Arnold Ventures who oversees the organization's criminal justice initiatives, compared the effect of COVID to the impact of crack cocaine in the 1980s: “Our current pandemic has been highly disruptive of community life, as was crack. The pandemic has taken young people away from prosocial environments like schools and afterschool programs. It has created stress and anxiety within our entire society, but particularly in communities that are living at the margins. It has caused police to withdraw from communities, for self-protective reasons related to COVID infection but also because they're not feeling appreciated at the community level. All of these forces have resulted in a loss of support for prosocial, prosafety forces at a community level.”

Along with the pandemic, the other major disruptive force of 2020 was the upheaval that followed the killing of George Floyd and the national focus on the problem of police brutality and mistreatment of Black Americans.<sup>8</sup>

According to experts, there are multiple ways that the “racial reckoning” of 2020 could have contributed to increased violence on the streets. Police resources are not unlimited. It is likely that energy and manpower that might otherwise have been spent patrolling streets or investigating crimes was redirected to patrolling protests (as well as dealing with the looting and property destruction that occurred in some places).



COURTESY GREG BERMAN.

The protests, and the reactions to the protests, may also have exacerbated a long-standing problem: low levels of trust in police among many Black Americans. According to Kami Chavis, a professor at Wake Forest University School of Law, “When you have the type of police

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<sup>8</sup> MY FOCUS HERE IS ON THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MAY HAVE GIVEN RISE TO INCREASED SHOOTINGS IN 2020, RATHER THAN LARGER TRENDS THAT ALSO PLAYED A ROLE, SUCH AS THE WIDESPREAD AVAILABILITY OF GUNS IN THE UNITED STATES. MANY OF THE HISTORICAL FORCES THAT HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO STREET VIOLENCE HAVE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED BLACK AMERICANS. AS SHANI BUGGS HAS ARGUED, “THE COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE BEEN THE LEAST INVESTED IN AND THE LEAST SUPPORTED THROUGH FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITY, THROUGH HOUSING STABILITY, THROUGH QUALITY EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS, AND THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR CHILDREN...THOSE ARE THE SAME COMMUNITIES THAT ARE EXPERIENCING HIGH RATES OF GUN VIOLENCE TODAY.”

<sup>9</sup> MARA GAY, “WHY DID THE NYPD SOLVE FEWER CRIMES LAST YEAR?” NEW YORK TIMES, 29 JANUARY 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/opinion/nypd-crime-murder.html>

misconduct that we've seen, it delegitimizes our entire criminal justice system. And so you won't have the community partners that you need in order to prevent and address the violence that's happening. People don't necessarily want to turn someone in or to help in an investigation. There are instances where people have tried to be helpful, and then they themselves have been arrested or made a suspect.”

Chavis’s argument seems to be supported by the numbers. The *New York Times* reported that police in New York were struggling to solve crimes: “The percentage of murders that were cleared—that is to say, solved by arrest or other means—fell from 67 percent in 2019 to 50.9 percent for the same period in 2020, a decline of 24 percent.”<sup>9</sup>

As the season of protest wore on, it became clear that many activists were imagining a world without any police at all. The slogan “defund the police” began to appear more and more frequently, both on the streets and in the pages of leading periodicals.

While polling would reveal that the idea of defunding the police was broadly unpopular, including among Black Americans, the slogan did express a very real desire for less aggressive, less visible, and less harmful policing that was fiercely held by many people. In the face of this desire, it would be understandable if many police officers began to exercise their discretion to minimize the potential for conflict with the community. While there is no hard data to demonstrate that this is what happened, there are plenty of anecdotal reports. For example, Joseph Richardson, the University of Maryland criminologist, told this story:

A few months ago, I had a long discussion with a cop who lives on my block in Philadelphia. I asked him why gun violence was increasing in Philly. His take, as an officer on the beat, was, “Look, I’m not jumping out of my car, I’m not doing any more pat downs on the corner, if I know someone’s going to throw a camera in my face.” He told me that he used to tell kids out on the street, “Listen, you got thirty minutes to get off the corner. If I come back in thirty minutes and you’re out here, whatever consequences happen, you know what it is.” Now he’s like, “I don’t even tell the kid that. I just let him stay out there.” . . . One of my really close friends, who does hospital violence intervention work, was telling me this story in Baltimore. He said that he saw two guys

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<sup>9</sup> MARA GAY, “WHY DID THE NYPD SOLVE FEWER CRIMES LAST YEAR?” *NEW YORK TIMES*, 29 JANUARY 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/opinion/nypd-crime-murder.html>

fighting. Clearly it could've turned into a shooting. My friend goes around the corner and tells two cops sitting in their squad car. He says, "There are two guys around the corner that are fighting." And the cops looked at him like, "So?" He couldn't believe it.

Given the paucity of rigorous research, reasonable people can come to different conclusions about how and why gun violence spiked in 2020. Simple, silver-bullet explanations should be viewed with skepticism, but any compelling account must wrestle with the multifaceted implications of criminal justice reform, COVID, and the aftermath of the protests against police brutality and racism.

## "We Have to Do Both"

As 2020 turned into 2021 and it became increasingly clear that the spike in gun violence was not going to go away of its own accord, policy makers in New York and other cities began to face increasing calls to respond.

Traditionally, the solution called for has been increased policing. According to Tracie Keesee, a former police officer and the cofounder of the Center for Policing Equity,

You are now hearing some of the same conversations that happened in the '90s, that we are going to need more officers to get spiking crime under control. I think we need to be very careful about this. I 100-percent believe that there are occasions where you need to have someone who's armed respond to a call for service. . . But what the community is also asking for—not all communities, but some—what they're asking for is a lot of investment in prevention and a lot of focus on the social needs that people have and making sure that those things are also taken care of. . . . When you talk to the community about it, the community is not thinking about law enforcement as the first priority for public safety. For them, public safety means housing security. It means food security. It means health care. They want to get those things in alignment and make sure that armed response personnel are not the primary thing you go to when you talk about public health safety.

For Jeffrey Butts, the director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College, "Anyone who thinks that the way to improve public safety is to invest in law enforcement is just pushing us further down the path toward a police state, where the only public safety we

have is purchased and maintained through force and coercion. That's really disturbing to me. The police can't prove that they have the effect on public safety that they claim. But they can definitely win the game of public safety theater with badges and cars and lights and perp walks and people in cuffs. The public sees that and thinks, 'I'll be safe because look at what they did.' I understand the impulse, but if that's all we have, we're never going to really make durable improvements in community wellbeing."

Butts is representative of many activists and academics who hunger for responses to violence that do not emphasize increased law enforcement. Unfortunately for those who are in this camp, at this point the evidence is stronger for police-based responses to violence than it is for investments in community-based prevention. Much of the public conversation about gun violence seems to default to a simplistic binary: those who argue for addressing long-term "root causes" versus those who seek to deploy police to respond more immediately.

This dynamic feels counterproductive. Northwestern University sociologist Andrew Papachristos articulated an alternative approach: "I worry about pitting short-term and long-term solutions against each other. . . . Especially in the current political moment, we're often pitting the need to address structural problems against the need to intervene in the here and now. The truth is that we have to do both. I don't think we should ignore these large issues and how these systems were built. But to take those apart, whether it's to dismantle them or to build new systems, that work is going to take generations. We have to do this work, but at the same time we have to save lives today."

Among strategies that foreground enforcement, many criminal justice scholars point to hot-spot policing—which seeks to focus the energies of police on discrete locations where crime tends to cluster—as having a particularly strong evidence base. They also suggest that devoting increased police resources to investigating and solving crimes would be a worthwhile investment toward reducing violence.

The evidence is also solid in support of focused deterrence, an intervention devised and promulgated by David Kennedy of John Jay College, that engages both law enforcement and community actors in identifying groups that are engaged in violent behavior. Members of these groups receive an offer of intensive support and services if they need help finding a job, getting sober, etc. They are also informed that the justice system will respond promptly to any further

acts of violence. All of this is communicated clearly, respectfully, and in person so that the message is clear: the violence needs to stop.

In addition to evidence-based, enforcement-oriented solutions, urban policy makers should be making strategic investments to strengthen neighborhoods with high rates of criminal behavior. “Libraries, parks, rec centers, pools, free internet—those are all crime prevention activities and resources,” according to Caterina Roman of Temple University.<sup>10</sup> Social scientists Jennifer Doleac of Texas A&M University and Anna Harvey of New York University have documented a range of what they call “civic goods” that have shown promise in reducing crime, including providing summer jobs to teens, offering cognitive behavioral therapy to high-risk youth, and improving street lighting.<sup>11</sup>

Many criminal justice experts think that “collective efficacy,” an idea first advanced by Robert Sampson, a sociologist at Harvard University, is a particularly crucial tool for fighting gun violence. According to criminologist David Weisburd of Hebrew University, “When people who live in a community trust their neighbors, and when they believe that they should respond cooperatively to problems in the community, that reflects high collective efficacy. The theory is that streets in which you have higher collective efficacy will exercise informal social control over criminal behavior. That's also part of broken windows theory and social disorganization theory. A few years ago, we did an NIH [National Institutes of Health] study in Baltimore in which we looked at hundreds of streets. . . . We asked people whether they trust their neighbors. . . . On the hottest crime blocks, less than 50 percent of people trusted their neighbors. On the lowest crime blocks, 85 percent of people trusted their neighbors.”

One particular program comes up frequently in discussions of alternatives to policing: Cure Violence. Originally developed in Chicago, Cure Violence attempts to halt cycles of retaliatory violence through community organizing, links to services, and street outreach by “credible messengers” who have directly experienced violence themselves. Cure Violence is a model that speaks to our current political moment in many ways, not the least of which is the prominent role that formerly incarcerated individuals play in staffing these programs.

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<sup>10</sup> EMILY BADGER AND QUOCTRUNG BUI, “THE PANDEMIC HAS HINDERED MANY OF THE BEST IDEAS FOR REDUCING VIOLENCE,” *NEW YORK TIMES*, 6 OCTOBER 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/10/06/upshot/crime-pandemic-cities.html>

<sup>11</sup> JENNIFER DOLEAC AND ANNA HARVEY, “STEMMING VIOLENCE BY INVESTING IN CIVIC GOODS,” *VITAL CITY*, FEBRUARY 2022.

Butts of John Jay College is one of the country's leading Cure Violence researchers. He has documented Cure Violence programs helping to reduce shootings in several neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn. He believes city officials should expand funding for Cure Violence. But even he offered an important cautionary note: "These programs have shown that they can reach out and connect with a critical number of teenagers that you really need to influence if you are going to reduce neighborhood violence. But we need to have research that shows it's effective. We're nowhere near making Cure Violence merit the label 'evidence-based.' The problem with Cure Violence right now is that it has become a movement, as opposed to a strategy or an intervention plan. People talk about Cure Violence and the whole public health approach like people talk about religion."



CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

According to Marlon Peterson, who worked as a "violence interrupter" at a Cure Violence program in Brooklyn after being released from prison, "Cure Violence itself is a model of suppression: stop the violence, move on. You can stop beefs, and that's obviously huge. You save lives when you stop beef. But you're not addressing the underlying reason a lot of people have beef in the first place. I think New York has done a good job with trying to take a more holistic approach with the wraparound models and all that sort of stuff. I also think Cure Violence has to be aware that it needs to be able to constantly rebrand itself. When I came home a decade



ago, Cure Violence was cool. After a while, you are just some old dudes, and it's not as effective. It doesn't speak to what young people are dealing with now.”

According to Shani Buggs of the University of California, Davis:

The Cure Violence model, and the theory behind it, we don't know if it actually works in every community and every city . . . the Cure Violence model was designed in the 1990s with the understanding that violence is contagious. It was also designed with the understanding that if you can intervene with group leaders, you can then use the social and political capital of those leaders to help curb violence among their followers. Violence has evolved in a number of different ways since the 1990s. The Cure Violence model may not fit the times any more. In many cases, you don't have structured, hierarchical groups with traditional leaders. That's not what we see today. You have much more loosely formed, smaller groups that may be fighting against each other, even though they're under the bigger umbrella of a known gang or group.

In sum, there is no magic formula that can guarantee success in addressing the recent rise in shootings. Even highly regarded programs like Cure Violence are no panacea. In the days ahead, local policy makers will want to tailor their responses to the unique needs of different places—the answers will no doubt look different in Chicago and Los Angeles (and in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville), depending upon local needs and assets. No matter the ultimate mix, policy makers would be wise to think beyond the false choice between community crime prevention and law enforcement that frames so much of the public debate about crime in this country. The most logical approach will almost certainly involve investments in both.

## Science Is Not an Ideology

There is a fair amount of soul-searching going on in the criminal justice research community at the moment. Academia has been a principal battleground in the "racial reckoning" that has consumed many quarters of our country over the past year or two. Researchers are rethinking the kinds of questions they ask—for example, many are trying to expand the frame of program evaluation to encompass not just whether a given initiative reduces crime or not, but to determine whether there are any ancillary harms associated with the project. Focused deterrence is an example of the kind of program that many academics think merits renewed scrutiny. As Caterina

Roman of Temple said, “there are so many things that could go wrong with focused deterrence, given its complex implementation structure. You can reduce violence but harm people.”

Many researchers are also expressing a commitment to new modes of evaluation design and data analysis, with an emphasis on participatory research models that engage former gang members or formerly incarcerated individuals in the process. This is to the good—a necessary corrective to researchers conducting experiments in vulnerable communities and extracting career-enhancing knowledge without offering much in return.

Jeremy Travis, who served as the director of the National Institute of Justice in Bill Clinton’s administration, said that there is “no question” that the state of criminal justice research in the United States has improved since the 1990s. Still, he said, “we have a long ways to go, particularly in terms of our data infrastructure. We don’t have the ability to track events in real time. We’re feeling that loss right now as we try to understand this spike in gun homicides. . . . I think there’s still a narrowness in some of the criminal justice research that is very system-centric, rather than looking at the larger societal forces. That’s unfortunate. We miss the proverbial forest for the trees too often. But we’ve come a long way. The federal funding for research has made a big difference.”

Criminologist David Weisburd agreed that the field of criminal justice research has made progress, but also pointed to some worrying developments: “There was a tremendous (positive) movement from the early parts of my career through the Obama administration. There was a long period when there seemed to be consensus among people on the left and the right that there is this thing called evidence, which we’re going to use to help us make decisions. . . . That sort of working together seems to be falling away. . . . What’s happened during the Trump administration is that there’s been this pulling apart, so you can’t really listen to someone on the other side without being a traitor to your particular view.”

According to Weisburd, “the problem with ideologues is they’re so certain that what they’re doing is right. This applies to Black Lives Matter and it applies to Republicans. It applies to everyone. The minute you start bringing in facts, it makes things more complicated and nuanced. There is a lack of introspection that we really need to be wary of. I think it was John Maynard Keynes, the economist, who once said that policy makers don’t like evidence, because it makes making decisions harder. But the outcomes of such ‘harder decision making’ will be much better. That is the idea of evidence-based policy.”

Andrew Papachristos of Northwestern said he tells graduate students, “You can't ask questions you don't want answers to.” According to Papachristos,

I think some academics are picking and choosing the questions they are asking based on where we are in terms of the current political moment. I don't think that's entirely bad. . . I think it's good to take up new perspectives and ask new questions from an academic perspective, but you have to be willing to understand the answers, even if it doesn't go the way you hoped it would go. As an example, I would love to get up and say that street outreach is the most impactful thing we can do to reduce gun violence today, but I can't say that. I can say it's super promising. I can say that sometimes we see evidence that it works, but I can't say that this is the solution to gun violence. I can't say that, even though I personally really want to. . . . As a scientist, I have to say, “Here's what we know and here's what we don't know.”

Jeffrey Butts of John Jay College admitted, “It's fair to say that people bring ideological and political biases to their work.” It is difficult to determine how this plays out in criminal justice research, but it may mean that certain kinds of issues, in particular anything that could be interpreted as being supportive of conservative ideas about families, policing or individual responsibility, may be less likely to get investigated.

Tracie Keese said that political polarization has made the work of the Center for Policing Equity harder. “We have very difficult conversations on both the left and on the right about what policing should look like,” Keese said. “We pride ourselves to be able to have those kinds of conversations with everybody. We try to bring unlikely folks into the same space. For us, it is about what is best for the community, what is best for public safety, and what is best for the police officers. But some days are hard, really hard.”

Peter Moskos of John Jay College observed that “the left is far less willing to engage. I don't get invited to those panels. They don't want to hear dissenting views, and I think that's worrisome. There is an attack on the traditional model of free speech...But hopefully the pendulum will swing back.”

David Weisburd shared the concern about politics influencing research. “What is particularly worrying is when scholars just can't tell a story that contradicts their perspective,” he said. “I don't like it when I know what people are going to say before they even start the research. It's not good for the science. Science is about being open to contrary findings. It is not an ideology!”

The bottom line is this: the current political climate is a major stumbling block to effective policy making, unnecessarily limiting the scope of the questions that researchers are asking and potentially undermining public confidence in research findings.

## What's to Come?

The challenges of 2020 haven't completely dissipated, but there are some encouraging signs that there may be clearer skies ahead. The economy, while imperfect, seems to have rebounded from the pandemic recession. The increase in the rate of shootings was much smaller in 2021 than in 2020 (although the number of shootings have not returned to pre-pandemic levels). In New York, a new mayor has been elected, bringing the promise of rebirth and new energy at City Hall.

Perhaps most important, New York is blessed with civic muscle memory. It has been unusually successful in reducing both crime and incarceration in the past. And it has the necessary infrastructure, both inside and outside of government, to implement creative strategies to reduce violence quickly.

Three areas in particular seem worthy of deeper and more sustained work: crime concentration, clearance rates, and collective efficacy. As David Weisburd, Andrew Papachristos, and others have argued, most shootings are committed by a small and identifiable group of individuals in a handful of locations. The challenge is to come up with new responses to this reality that don't feel like flooding the streets with police officers or using the formal levers of the justice system in an excessively heavy-handed manner. And even while government is doing this, it must also figure out how to help police solve more open cases and how to make the kinds of investments in local neighborhoods that will help build a sense of trust and community efficacy over time.

We are living in an age of umbrage and free-floating anxiety, fueled in no small part by social media. There is no shortage of doomsayers predicting that New York and other American cities are on the brink of returning to the bad old days of the 1980s and 1990s. But there is also no shortage of criminal justice experts who are cautiously optimistic that rather than going backwards, we will choose a path of reform in the days ahead that will not just ensure the safety of our urban spaces but will also address some of the harms that the criminal justice system has wrought in the past, particularly in communities of color. ●

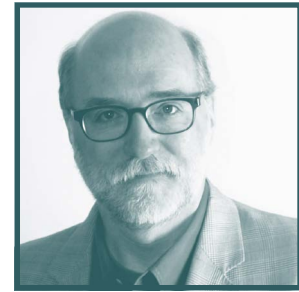
# **At the Crossroads**

## Interview Series

Between March 2021 and February 2022, The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation published a series of interviews HFG Distinguished Fellow of Practice Greg Berman conducted with twelve criminal justice experts about the rise in gun violence in New York and other American cities. The experts, who reflect a range of disciplines and experience, discuss what they believe to be the causes of the rise in gun violence, effective remedies, and areas for continued research and inquiry.

## Social Disruptions Reveal Who You Are

### Jeffrey Butts, John Jay College of Criminal Justice



March 2, 2021

Jeffrey Butts is the director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College. His career has been focused on improving outcomes for young people involved in the justice system. Prior to coming to John Jay, he worked as a research fellow with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, as the director of the Program on Youth Justice at the Urban Institute, and as a senior research associate at the National Center for Juvenile Justice.

In this conversation, Butts talks about some of the topics that have been the focus of his research in recent years, including Cure Violence and other efforts to reduce violence that do not rely on law enforcement. He also discusses some of the challenges currently confronting the field of criminal justice research.

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**Greg Berman: I'd like to start with a fairly basic question. NYPD reports suggest that in 2020, shootings were up 97 percent from the previous year. We also know that lots of crimes, even crimes of violence, don't end up getting reported. So things may be even worse than the numbers suggest. My question is: How bad a problem do you think we have in New York at the moment?**

Jeffrey Butts: First of all, it's not just New York. A lot of major cities around the country are seeing similar patterns. There's a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding around, in part because the popular media tends to focus on percent change from year to year. A friend of mine once wrote a report called "The Tyranny of Small Numbers." If your shootings go from two to four, that's a 100-percent increase. So you have to keep in mind how low the numbers were to begin with. New York is still in a very good condition relative to 1994. But if you only look at a graph that starts in 2014, the increase in shootings that we've seen seems large. That's not to dismiss the increase, because there is a definite increase. But it is also worth pointing out that you don't see similar increases in other violent offenses, like robbery and sexual assaults.

### **What's your sense of what's going on? Why have shootings gone up?**

It's important to look at the distinction between shooting incidents, where a gun has been fired at someone, versus shooting victimizations, where someone has actually been hit by a bullet. In New York, attempted shootings have gone up more than victimizations. The fact that there are more unsuccessful shootings suggests that the people involved in these shootings are not your typical shooters.

My theory, and I'm not the only one who thinks this, is that what we're seeing is a reflection of predominantly young men walking around with hand guns and deciding to use them, where a year ago, they may have thought twice, or they may not have been walking around with a hand gun because they were actually in school or had a job. Petty interpersonal grievances and insults are turning into bullets being fired because of the disruption to the social structure caused by the pandemic. If that's correct, it explains why you are seeing similar increases in other areas around the country. It's not a function of the stupid theories that people have advanced about bail reform. People tend to think that the criminal justice system is supposed to keep crime under control, so when crime goes up, they look at what's going wrong with the criminal justice system. That is wrong-headed. That's not how you explain social phenomena.

**Having said that, you also said that a year ago, the would-be shooters might have thought twice about using a gun. Does this imply that they are making the calculus that there's not going to be any consequence for their behavior?**

No, I don't think that's how young people think. You don't pull the gun out of your pocket and think, "What is the sentence range for this offense? What's the probability of conviction if I am charged?" That's not how things happen. You can't explain short-term fluctuations in crime rates and behavior by looking to the criminal justice response or lack thereof. When your normal person says, "We need to fix the criminal justice system," they're thinking about cops on the beat, arrests, prosecutions, and incarceration. That has never been the way to explain changes in the crime rate.

**What about the notion, popularized by Jane Jacobs, that having "eyes on the street" helps deter crime? Is it possible that we don't have eyes on the street in New York in the way that we did pre-COVID?**

I would agree that the day-to-day guardianship over shared space, which means people walking around the neighborhood, whether they have on police uniforms or bright orange outreach jackets or something else, helps keep things under control. I don't know about you, but I haven't stepped outside for three or four days. I think that's true of a lot of people. You see scenes, especially during the freak-out months of April, May, and June, where there just wasn't that kind of presence on the streets. I think it is true that people feel safer walking around if there are a lot of people around them.

Have you ever heard people talk about taking hallucinogens? People say hallucinogens don't change who you are, they reveal who you are. I think social disruptions, like a pandemic, don't make who we are, they reveal who we are. What it's revealed for me is that we have a lot of young people who have no reason to believe in the social structure and civic behavior. They don't benefit from it. They know they're never going to be a part of it. This whole idea of, "Go to school, get a job, buy a house, have kids"—they don't see that in their future. Protecting themselves and their friends in the short term with violence seems acceptable to them. I think the pandemic just revealed the extent to which that's always been there. It's been kept slightly under control by people being busier.

**You say violence has been kept "slightly under control," but we've just experienced essentially three decades of dramatic and sustained reductions in crime in New York City. Isn't that more than just keeping things "slightly under control"?**

It depends on how you talk about it. One of the reasons I criticize law enforcement is because they tend to say, "We reduced this. We slashed this. We cut this." Whenever I have a chance, I always say to them, "You're just setting yourself up to being exposed in the future as having exaggerated your own effectiveness." Why not say, "We have benefited from a great reduction in crime"?

Definitely, things came down a lot from the 1990s, but you're more impressed with the decline if you're looking at citywide numbers. In some neighborhoods within our city, it would be hard to convince someone that things are incredibly better than they were thirty years ago, because they didn't experience that much change.

**The NYPD is also reporting that 70 percent of shootings were unsolved in 2020. Does that kind of clearance rate concern you?**



The efficiency rate of investigations and arrests is an important thing. It is important to remember that clearance rates have a numerator and a denominator. You have to be careful when you accept the clearance rate because the denominator of a clearance rate can be reduced through administrative decision-making. When I was living in Chicago, I remember there was a scandal about the police manipulating the clearance rate by moving shootings across from one calendar year to another in order to even out the calculation. You have to have a very broad way of thinking about the overall efficiency and effectiveness of law enforcement and not just accept the numbers as they present them.

I think anyone who thinks that the way to improve public safety is to invest in law enforcement is just pushing us further down the path toward a police state, where the only public safety we have is purchased and maintained through force and coercion.

**If you were going to respond to the increase in shootings with some sort of law enforcement intervention, what would you do differently? Or maybe you don't believe there should be a law enforcement response?**

I think anyone who thinks that the way to improve public safety is to invest in law enforcement is just pushing us further down the path toward a police state, where the only public safety we have is purchased and maintained through force and coercion.

That's really disturbing to me. The police can't prove that they have the effect on public safety that they claim. But they can definitely win the game of public safety theater with badges and cars and lights and perp walks and people in cuffs. The public sees that and thinks, "I'll be safe because look at what they did." I understand the impulse, but if that's all we have, we're never going to really make durable improvements in community well-being.

**What about non-enforcement responses? Where should we be investing our energies?**

You and I both know a little bit about the Cure Violence model. Programs like Save Our Streets—that's where I would put all my investments.

**I wanted to ask you about the state of Cure Violence research. It is a model that resonates very powerfully in the current political moment. How much do we actually know about whether it works or not?**

These programs have shown that they can reach out and connect with a critical number of teenagers that you really need to influence if you are going to reduce neighborhood violence. But we need to have research that shows it's effective. We're nowhere near making Cure Violence merit the label "evidence-based."

The problem with Cure Violence right now is that it has become a movement, as opposed to a strategy or an intervention plan. People talk about Cure Violence and the whole public health approach like people talk about religion. It's hard to have a rational conversation about the need to build the evidence for the model. As soon as you say something like that, the believers in the model will reject you.

We're not making enough progress, in my view, in terms of nailing down exactly how to make these programs effective. In particular, I think there has to be some connection between the formal system of law enforcement and the Cure Violence programs. I do appreciate the extent to which people try to keep that connection informal or out of the public eye. If the police take it over, then you're participating in the creation of a police state. But if you don't have a connection to the formal system and you don't have professional management, the danger is that Cure Violence just becomes a bunch of well-meaning people who are not going to have an effect.

**One of the pieces of Cure Violence research that you did that struck a chord with me was looking at the attitudes of young men who had been touched by the program. What did you learn from that study?**

As you move through adolescence and into your twenties, at some point, you have to start assuming that not everyone is out to get you. You do have some responsibility to make your own life. A sense of community and mutual responsibility has to emerge from somewhere. If someone is growing up in an environment of violence and instability and you never know whose couch you're sleeping on from one week to the next, it's a struggle to build that. But it is critical.

What we saw from the study you referenced was a small increase in the willingness of someone to believe that the police have a role to play in community well-being, when we compared young men who lived in a neighborhood with a Cure Violence program to those without a Cure Violence program. I did find that very encouraging.

The one thing that gives me hope is the increasing detail and ubiquity of administrative data. If we can start using it creatively, and not allow it to use us, we could start to be able to look at non-individual-level interventions in a more sophisticated way.

**I've seen you talk in other settings about some of the biases and perverse incentives that shape the field of criminal justice research. Obviously, the need to publish is one. The bias toward evaluating projects that can show change over short time frames rather than long time frames is another. You've also talked about how it is easier to measure interventions that are looking at individual change rather than broader community-wide change. Do you have hope that these dynamics will change in the years to come, or do you think they will be with us for the rest of our lives?**

I begin from a base of pessimism about seeing things improve. The one thing that gives me hope is the increasing detail and ubiquity of administrative data. If we can start using it creatively, and not allow it to use us, we could look at non-individual-level interventions in a more sophisticated way.

For example, if we were more creative with getting data from social media, instead of asking people in a given neighborhood, "Do you feel better?" you could track their cell phones and see how many people are using the local park and how many actually use their local train station. You can start collecting more rigorous data. We need to do more experiments along that line where we change something simple like improving the stairwell down into the train station to make it feel more engaging and more hospitable. Let's do that in five stations and then compare that to another set of five that are just like them. We could see if there's an effect over time with data that's available passively through social media. I think that would be a way to start generating reliable, experimental data that a policy maker might listen to that's not rooted in law enforcement and not rooted in helping individuals one by one.

**I recently read a report that you did for Arnold Ventures called Reducing Violence Without Police. As it happens, I was reading the report at the same time that I was reading Robert Putnam's new book, *Upswing*. Among other things, Putnam writes about massive declines, starting roughly in 1970, in churchgoing and in conventional, two-parent family structures in the United States. It struck me that your review doesn't talk at all about the potential impacts of family or church on crime. It made me wonder if another bias in the field is a desire to avoid anything that could be interpreted as supportive of conservative ways of looking at the world.**

That report was a look across the empirical literature to see if there were any findings that are respectable and strong enough to rely upon that are not part of a policing world. Both of the things you mentioned, religious affiliation and two-parent families, are proxies for stable, supportive, civic society. There's nothing about belief in some super-being that has anything to do with public safety. But there's a slightly increased probability that if you do belong to a congregation, that you're not completely antisocial. Although, as we've seen, there's a great overlap right now between so-called Christian Evangelists and the people who are trying to undermine our government. So, religious affiliation does not always correlate to prosocial behavior.

**It has nothing to do with stability or supportive family relationships. By that logic, four parents would be better than two.**

The two-parent family thing is a vestige of our economic structure. Single parent family means higher probability of insufficient income. It has nothing to do with stability or supportive family relationships. By that logic, four parents would be better than two.

Certainly it's fair to say that people bring ideological and political biases to their work. The group that we formed to do the Arnold report, we all got together and started talking about what we should explore and what was useful or not. I think we probably did stay away from things that were conventional thinking that we didn't think would be causal.

**I was also struck looking at the Arnold report that when you focused on reducing substance abuse, you didn't mention drug court. I think of drug court as a well-researched intervention that has shown an impact on reducing substance abuse. Am I reading the literature wrong?**

No. I do know people that have done respectable work on criminal court drug courts and say they can be helpful. I became disenchanted with them because I think drug courts just help perpetuate the way Americans think about drug use. I would make all drugs legal so you can eliminate the black-market profit incentives. We should stop arresting people and start treating addiction as a health problem. Drug courts never talk about that.

**Okay, last question. [Attorney General nominee] Merrick Garland calls you up and says, “Jeff, I want you to be the head of the National Institute of Justice, and money is no object.” Where would you be investing research dollars right now, if the goal is to improve the state of knowledge about community violence?**

First of all, if we continue to talk about violence and avoid discussing guns, that would be a tragedy. We don't have to confiscate everyone's guns, but we do need creative solutions. If we don't deal with guns, we're never going to solve these problems. That's the biggest hurdle. I would invest everything in that right now.

**If we don't deal with guns, we're never going to solve these problems.**

After that, I would explore how to remedy crisis-oriented income issues. The fact that you could live in this country and be doing everything the way you're supposed to do it and get laid off and two months later not have a place to sleep is just disgusting. Other countries have figured this out. Those are two easy things: fixing income inequities and firearms. ●

# People Who Do Harmful Things Are Reacting to Harmful Things

Marlon Peterson, *Bird Uncaged*



April 8, 2021

Marlon Peterson grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. He experienced a difficult childhood, which culminated, when he was nineteen, in his involvement in a robbery that led to the deaths of two people. Peterson ended up serving ten years in prison. While there, he earned a degree and became an activist on behalf of incarcerated people.

Peterson has been making up for lost time since his release in 2009. Among other things, he has worked as a violence interrupter for New York's first Cure Violence program, hosted his own podcast called *Decarcerated*, and written a memoir called *Bird Uncaged: An Abolitionist's Freedom Song*.

In this conversation, Peterson talks about the easy availability of guns in American cities, the role of racism in perpetuating violence, and his response to Jeffrey Butts' cautionary notes about Cure Violence.

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**Greg Berman:** In honor of your forthcoming book, I thought I might read to you several excerpts of things that you have written over the years and ask you to elaborate on them. For example, a few months ago, you wrote, "Some are opposed to bail reforms, citing a jump in crime numbers from the first couple months after New York ended the practice as evidence of the need to repeal bail legislation." I am assuming that you don't think bail reform has led to the uptick in shootings. Do you have an alternative theory about what's going on?

Marlon Peterson: It's the COVID crisis and the racial upheaval. If you look at what happened last year, and is still happening, you had more young people out of school. And you had people cooped up in households with no outlet. All of this pushes some of these younger folks to go outside. It also pushes some people to articulate their frustrations online, whether it be on Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, whatever. People have this misplaced anger and rage, and they go

online and say stuff. And we know now that online beefs are leading to more street beefs than ever before.

And then there's just less money. People are out of work and struggling. So you had young people who had been supplementing their family incomes with whatever side jobs they may have had—Burger King, Wendy's, whatever. And they either got less hours or no hours. And then summer youth employment opportunities flew away.

So all those things add up. And then there is the trauma of the COVID crisis. Young folks have aunts and mothers and grandparents who are suffering from COVID or dying from COVID. And that's a trauma that's not being dealt with. So trauma and anger and frustration lead to conflicts with other people on the streets in their community.

And then there's the police part. The police violence hit hard because it was unavoidable. There were no sports. There were no concerts. There were no clubs, no parties. So, even though we're all aware [police shootings] have been happening for years, thanks to COVID, you are seeing it every day on the news and in your feed. Celebrities are talking about it. Rappers are talking about it. Athletes are talking about it. And it's like a cauldron that's being mixed all at once.

I made an Instagram post about this before the summer started. I just sort of outlined all these things I'm talking to you about right now, Greg, and I said that we should expect more violence in our communities in the next months. So nothing we have seen is surprising to me.

No one says, "Well, you know, they ruled stop-and-frisk unconstitutional, so now we can hang out."

**What about the argument that people are no longer scared to leave the house with a gun because they feel like they won't get caught. Do you think that's behind some of the violence we have seen?**

I don't see that. I'm somebody who carried guns at one point in time. I grew up in the height of the stop-and-frisk era. I knew that I could be stopped and frisked at any point—and I was, often. But I wasn't afraid that they would catch me with a gun. Young people don't think about things in that way. When you're at that age, when you're out here hustling, you know you could go to jail for it. But that doesn't factor into your thinking. You feel untouchable at that age.

We in the field of criminal justice are aware of all these changes to policy and practice, but kids on the street aren't aware of these changes. They're not paying attention. No one says, "Well, you know, they ruled stop-and-frisk unconstitutional, so now we can hang out." They're not doing that. So I don't agree with the idea that there's some sort of consciousness that police aren't policing the way they used to, so we can walk outside with our weapons now.

This nation's inability to really do anything substantial and sensible around guns is because of racism.

**You once wrote, "I grew up in a community where guns are easier to get than sneakers." I'm assuming that was hyperbole, but how easy were guns to get when you were a kid?**

The first gun I ever got was from the bodega around my way. I got it from a corner store. I didn't have to do some special ops thing. I just went to the corner store and bought it through the slot.

I still think it's easy to get guns. Guns aren't difficult. They've never been difficult. There are more guns in this country than there are people. They're easy to get because there's a huge supply.

When somebody decides to pick up a gun, it's because there's something inside that they're dealing with. . . . Issues with trauma are always at the root before somebody picks up a gun.

**You've written: "We know that guns kill, particularly Black people. Yet this nation has not cared enough to slow down gun production." So you think that the failure to enact meaningful gun reform legislation is tied to racism?**

Absolutely, I think so. The fact that Black and Brown people are dying at these rates by this particular source has not impacted the nation enough. This nation's inability to really do anything substantial and sensible around guns is because of racism. But I also want to put in a caveat, too, because this nation really believes in guns. I remember when the mass shooting in Newtown



happened. I was sitting in the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, and I was like, “Oh, they are going to do something now, because they shot these white kids in a white neighborhood.” And two or three days later, the NRA said, “We need more guns.” And at that point I was like, “Well, this nation’s committed to violence.”

**You’ve talked about how gun violence is related to underlying trauma, writing, “At the individual and communal level, trauma is at the bottom of antisocial violent behaviors.” What do you mean when you say this?**

When somebody decides to pick up a gun, it’s because there’s something inside that they’re dealing with. People think that gang beef is senseless. And there’s some truth to that, but we also forget that individuals in gangs are people who got shit going on. They have issues. They have trauma. They got family stress. They got abuse issues, drug addiction. All these things are happening. And they bring all those things with them into the gang. And then, with that groupthink mentality that happens in a gang, there’s ample opportunity to act out what you got going on internally. Now you have a reason, you have a cause. A brotherhood. Issues with trauma are always at the root before somebody picks up a gun.

**I think I get what you mean by individual trauma. But you’re also talking about trauma at the communal level. Give me a sense of what that means to you.**

I think that police violence is a part of the trauma that causes people to do the things that they do. I wasn’t raised to not like police. I wasn’t raised in that type of household. But police, for whatever reason, would see me as a young kid and pick on me, and I wasn’t doing anything at that time. And it not only created this sort of animosity towards them, but it also created this feeling of, “All right, they treat me like a crook, I might as well do crook shit.” You know what I mean?

And that’s just using police violence as an example. But there are other types of violence on the communal level that are always impacting people. Health disparities and not having adequate access to good healthcare, for example. Those are things on a communal level that people don’t associate with gun violence. But when things are happening within your body or are not being adequately taken care of, it leads to frustration. As an adult, you know how to deal with those sorts of things. But when you’re sixteen and you’re walking up your block, or you’re coming out of your project, and you got these things happening, and somebody looks at you kind of funny,

you can snap. And from then on, the thing that was bothering you internally, whatever health issue you were dealing with, that's no longer a factor anymore. You're not even thinking about it. Now you just got beef, and that's the only thing that matters. You're not thinking about why you had it, what contributed to your mindset in the first place.

**In your book, you write: "It's not excusable for a victim to become a perpetrator, or for the perpetrator to claim victimhood, but they are realities." How do you balance the harms you've been talking about against individual responsibility and individual agency when it comes to criminal behavior?**

There should be an acknowledgement that people who do harmful things are reacting to harmful things but, as I said, it's not an excuse. I always say you don't absolve people for the harmful things that they do. But we have to acknowledge that perpetrators have been victimized before. I think that's why restorative justice is on the tips of many people's tongues now.

Did you see the horrific thing that happened in Harlem last week? These guys tried to hit on a girl in a liquor store. And she turned them down, from what we can see from the video camera footage. They followed her outside, and they ended up beating her up. They are still looking for these guys. That is horrific. There's no way to excuse that. But I do have to be able to understand that people don't wake up out of their beds and just do stuff like that unless there's some unaddressed mental issues. There's a build-up to that type of action.

**Your book is essentially a plea for prison abolition. The people who committed this act in Harlem . . . what should happen to them, in your mind? What should the consequence be for this kind of behavior?**

That's always the question. Should they go to jail? Right now, jail is all we got. That's what we have at the moment. We don't have any other type of solution to deal with egregious harm. We don't. But what I am saying is that in order to work towards an abolitionist future, we have to invest in addressing the underlying traumas that people are dealing with in our communities.

**I would love for there to be a future in which no one was harmed. But let's just stipulate for a moment that we aren't going to completely eliminate bad things from happening. In the future that you're imagining, what would be a better response than incarceration as a response to egregious harms?**

The abolitionist future, to me, is about really investing in resources to address the underlying issues that people have in these communities. Right now, jail is what we got. But we also know that jails are harmful places. Jail is all about get-back and vengeance. Everybody knows jails are fucked up places. They got millions of movies about it. It's like, "You killed my father, I'm going to kill your father." That sort of thing. We don't really think that this person we are sending to jail is redeemable, that a person can change. What does it do to send a person to jail? It doesn't do anything for them, other than to say we got you back.

**You talked earlier about growing up in the stop-and-frisk era. The quote that I highlighted about your relationship with the police from one of your writings was, "I take a personal affront to law enforcement when they speak to me as if I am a toy to be played with." Has every interaction you've ever had with the police been negative?**

Of course not. As a professional, I've been to One Police Plaza. When I have on a suit and I represent an organization or an issue, obviously the police are looking at me in a different light. But if I come back home in my hoodie around Bed-Stuy, then they don't know who I am. So, no, every interaction I've had hasn't been negative. I had an interaction recently when I got locked out of my car down here in the Bushwick area. Cops came by and they called somebody who helped me out. It's not that every interaction with the police is bad. But the most indelible interactions I've ever had with police have been bad. And also the most unwarranted interactions with police have been bad. I remember they stopped me someplace in my car, and they were just playing with me. They stopped me for no reason in my neighborhood around the corner from my house. And those are the types of interactions that always make me think about Eric Garner. It's not so much that all police are bad. That's a cliché. It's more that the force they wield in our community doesn't make me feel safe.

**You've written that you think that police are inherently a racist, white supremacist organization. Is it impossible to imagine a police department in a place like New York being led by a Black police chief, with Black leadership commensurate with the size of the African American population in the city, and where street officers actually come from the neighborhoods where they are patrolling? Is it impossible to imagine a police department that is not a racist, white supremacist organization?**

It's not impossible to imagine. But I will say that to believe that corrupt or brutal policing is only enacted by white officers wouldn't be true to history. The mere fact that we may have more Black folks, or Brown folks, or people who live in the community as police officers doesn't necessarily mean that police will be less brutal. Maybe they will. Maybe. But I also know that there's evidence to show that they have been just as, and sometimes much more, brutal.

We need a hyper-local approach to investing in infrastructure to address issues of violence and also putting people in the community to work taking care of the buildings and parks that are falling apart. We have to engage the people in the community so that they feel like it is theirs, instead of contractors coming into the community from different places.

Here's the thing. Policing, just like any organization, has a corporate culture. You know that no matter where you are, you're either going to become embedded into that corporate culture or you're going to be a rebel to that culture. And if you're a rebel to that culture, well, then your time is going to be either really short or very difficult. Look at Edwin Raymond. You know the officer, the Black guy from Brooklyn who exposed all these bad things happening in the department. He received death threats from inside the police department. So I'm just saying that, of course, we can imagine a future where policing isn't what we see today, just like I can imagine a world without prison. But I also have a right to say I don't believe that policing will be the tool that gets us where we need to go. I don't see policing as an institution being separate from corruption and brutality. I've seen police do the same thing in Trinidad, in Jamaica, in Ghana, in South Africa. There is a brutality to that corporate culture that always will clash with civility.

**I want to talk a little bit about what we should do now to combat the uptick in violence in New York. You have written: "There is no Batman with a never-ending utility belt of crime-fighting tools. Community based programs aimed at prevention and intervention are the Caped Crusader." So if we want to reduce community violence, where would you be making investments, if you were the mayor?**

We obviously need to invest in community-based approaches to violence. Where we are at, in New York City, harkens back to the late '70s and early '80s in terms of businesses being in shambles, stores boarded up, graffiti everywhere. I think we need a hyper-local approach to investing in infrastructure to address issues of violence and also putting people in the community to work taking care of the buildings and parks that are falling apart. We have to engage the people in the community so that they feel like it is theirs, instead of contractors coming into the community from different places.

Going forward, we also need to look for ways to reduce the militaristic form of policing. I think about the police and the way they dress, and the way that they look, and the weapons that they carry—those things are meant to intimidate. It's unnecessary. There's been an increase in shootings, yes, but this is not a war zone. I think the militaristic nature of the police culture incites an angst inside of these communities. I am thinking about ways to no longer have a need for police. That's what abolition is, the need to no longer have police. But I'm also thinking about ways to incrementally shift how police approach their business on a daily basis—how they look, how they dress, and the weapons that they walk around with.

**A number of the candidates for mayor in New York City have spoken favorably about the Cure Violence model and expressed a desire for more violence interruption. I spoke with Jeffrey Butts at John Jay College not long ago, and he said that while he thinks Cure Violence is worthy of further investment, we are a long way from being able to say that we know for certain that the model works and is evidence-based. He also expressed the concern that Cure Violence has almost become like a religion where you can't even criticize it. I'm curious, do you feel like people are starting to treat Cure Violence like it's above reproach?**

No, I definitely don't think that. I even criticize Cure Violence at times for different things.

**If you could wave a magic wand and improve one thing about Cure Violence, what would it be?**

I think we need a way for the people who are working as violence interrupters to be able to rise out of [these jobs]. I think there's a lot of retraumatization happening. As a violence interrupter, I've seen that firsthand. Folks shouldn't stay in those roles beyond a certain amount of time.

Cure Violence itself is a model of suppression: stop the violence, move on. You can stop beefs, and that's obviously huge. You save lives when you stop beef. But you're not addressing the underlying reason a lot of people have beef in the first place. I think New York has done a good job with trying to take a more holistic approach with the wraparound models.

I also think Cure Violence has to be aware that it needs to be able to constantly rebrand itself. When I came home a decade ago, Cure Violence was cool. After a while, you are just some old dudes, and it's not as effective. It doesn't speak to what young people are dealing with now. I can see S.O.S. becoming corny. I can see young people saying, "I don't want to wear that shirt. That's old. My father used to be down with that." That's another reason why violence interrupters need to be able to be moved up and out into other and bigger things.

## I don't think 2021 will be much better in the realm of community violence

**Part of the goal of this series is to try to bridge the research-practice divide and make sure that researchers are asking the right questions about community violence in New York City. Are there questions about community violence that you wish you had answers to but don't right now? Where should folks like Butts be focusing their energies?**

I think we need a lot more [knowledge] about the education space and the interactions with school and community. How do you mitigate and eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline? At what age should we be engaging young people? What's really bothering them? I think those of us who've been in the criminal justice space don't really understand what education leaders understand. I think that's a major piece of the puzzle that we should look into and interrogate.

**Anything that I missed? Anything else you want to say on this subject?**

Actually, yes. I don't think 2021 will be much better in the realm of community violence. I was walking outside early this morning, and I was looking at streets that I know. And they're barren. The stores are boarded up. And I see graffiti and all that sort of stuff. And I thought to myself, "If I was sixteen, how would I react to this store that's just shut up?" And it seems like a field day right now. Because people aren't really doing anything. There's nothing for people to do. There's also less money around. So young people are congregating in weird places with alcohol, with

weed, and with all these different types of opiates now. When you have those sorts of things clouding your mind, it can lead to a lot of really opportunistic harm. I just think that it could become a little bit more dangerous this year because of that.

**You started this last statement by talking about graffiti and boarded-up buildings. To my ears—**

No, it's not broken windows.

**It sounds an awful lot like broken windows.**

Well, here's the thing about the broken windows theory. The reason why it was wrong was the way it was implemented, or the way that [former New York Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani spoke about it. It said that police had to come in and they're the ones that are going to take care of things from a law enforcement perspective. I think we need to take care of the boarded-up windows and such, but not through enforcement. What I'm saying is that we should invest at a hyper-local level and get people in the communities who have a vested interest involved in taking care of things. I think that approach is different, and you are more likely to get buy-in from it. ●

## **We're Losing a Sense of Accountability**

### **Richard Aborn, Citizens Crime Commission of New York City**



May 13, 2021

Richard Aborn is the president of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City and a managing partner of the law firm Constantine Cannon. He has been an active presence on the New York City political scene for decades, and he ran for Manhattan District Attorney as a Democrat in 2009.

Much of Aborn's work over the years has involved the New York City Police Department in one way or another. In this conversation, he talks about the urgent need to improve both public safety and police legitimacy. He also offers a counterpoint to Jeffrey Butts and Marlon Peterson, arguing that recent criminal justice reforms in New York may have contributed to the recent surge in gun violence.

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**Greg Berman: We've gotten to a point where no one really denies that there is a problem of increased violence in New York. But we're now dealing with a war of competing narratives about how to explain the increase in violence. I'm hoping that you can help me parse the conflicting stories. You've got Mayor Bill de Blasio blaming the courts. You've got the NYPD pinning it on too much criminal justice reform. You've got the advocacy community saying, "Don't even suggest that bail legislation was responsible." You've got everyone pointing the finger at COVID. What's your sense of what's really going on out there?**

Richard Aborn: Nothing like starting out with an easy question. First of all, I think the expression that we have a "problem" with violence is really an understatement. I think we are now getting close to a crisis of violence. It is obviously well past a blip. The current trend is exceeding the trend from last year, which was already a sharp reversal of the declines from previous periods.

So I think we're in a crisis moment, and I'm very worried about it.



The truth of the matter is that no one knows what the real cause of the rise in violence is. It probably has multiple causes. In thinking about the rise in crime, one needs to go back to mid-2019, so that's pre-pandemic. And we begin to see some uptick in serious crimes. Not a sharp rise, but a definite rise. That uptick comes down when we go into lockdown and then goes right back up as we start to come out of lockdown in mid-2020. And then we get these terrible shootings that start, which continue unabated, and in fact are increasing to this day.

The expression that we have a “problem” with violence is really an understatement. I think we are now getting close to a crisis of violence. It is obviously well past a blip.

The bulk of the conversation about criminal justice in New York City in recent years has been about much-needed reforms—what laws are we getting rid of, how are we reining in police behavior, what cases shouldn't be prosecuted, where is jail no longer being imposed? All of these reforms are geared towards de-emphasizing the involvement of the criminal justice system. Now a lot of that is very healthy, but what I'm concerned about is whether this de-emphasis on accountability has signaled that we're taking our foot off the gas on violent crime. If you commit violent crimes, the system should respond.

We have lost some of that, both in reality and in the narrative. And I think that's one of the things that's leading to the rise in crime. This goes back to 2018 when we started decriminalizing marijuana, de-emphasizing quality-of-life enforcement, talking about bail reform, closing Rikers. . . . We did all of these things, which sent a message of decreased accountability. If one believes in deterrence theory, in essence, it means you believe that people engage in a risk analysis before they commit crime: “Is there a high likelihood that I'm going to be apprehended and punished if I engage in criminality?”

**Two of the people that I've talked to so far for this series, Jeffrey Butts and Marlon Peterson, are very dismissive of the idea that people on the street are making the kind of nuanced calculation that you just described. Are people really saying to themselves, “Oh, I wasn't going to carry a gun, but I just read in *the New York Times* that bail reform passed, so now I'm going to carry a gun”?**

I think that the would-be offending population is actually quite aware of what's going on. We do know from the research that visible policing can act as a deterrent to crime. If visible policing does act as a deterrent, that reinforces the notion that if people perceive the risk of apprehension, they're not going to engage in criminality. Why do they perceive the risk of apprehension? Because they see cops out there doing their job. My worry now is that we're focused strictly on reforms, plenty of which I've supported and many of which are very necessary, but some of which go too far. I think we're losing a sense of accountability.

**Is the 2019 bail legislation an example of a reform that goes too far?**

Some of the problems with that particular piece of legislation have already been fixed, but I think one of the big mistakes we made was not giving judges discretion to consider dangerousness to the community, as is done in the federal system. I think that part of the bail statute needs to be amended. The bail reform discussion is a classic example of what I'm talking about. Because I think a lot of people perceive that there's no longer bail for any offense, that you just get arrested and you get released. I think that's a common understanding.

Violent crime is now reaching a crisis level. I'm using the word "crisis" with precision. People are becoming very alarmed about the rise in violence.

**One of the narratives out there is that what we're seeing is the consequence of police retreating from proactive policing. Do you think that's a factor in the rise in violence?**

Virtually every time we've seen an uptick in crime, we hear this argument. And the true answer is that I don't know. I don't know if the cops are pulling back or not. But let's be honest, the police have been the target of an enormous campaign against them. The New York City Council is trying to make their job harder to do. There's been a big effort to undermine their funding. Whether that is right or wrong, the police are going to personalize that. They're human beings. We see record numbers of senior officers leaving the NYPD in droves. That's a big problem. The experience is going out the door. It's happening because cops are getting fed up with the amount of abuse they're taking.

Parenthetically, I should say that the cops have brought some of this on themselves. The cops need to change their behavior. I have no doubt about that. But at some point, the cops are

going to say, “Enough is enough.” I mean, how much abuse can they take? Does that result in a slow down? It could.

**You ran for Manhattan District Attorney a few years ago. I’m sure that you are following the current race for DA closely. I’m curious whether you share my sense that crime has not been a major issue in either the DA race or in the mayoral race thus far.**

I think that would have been a fair characterization at the beginning of these races. But I think there is a shift taking place. Violent crime is now reaching a crisis level. I’m using the word “crisis” with precision. People are becoming very alarmed about the rise in violence. As we are having this discussion, we are now into our fifth week of a mass shooting having occurred in each of the preceding five weeks. And we’re doing this on the 14th anniversary of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech, where some 32 people were killed. So the violence is very much in the air now, and I think you see a shift taking place among some of the candidates, both at the mayoral level and at the DA level, because people are getting very worried.

I speak with a lot of the mayoral candidates and their staff and a lot of the DA candidates. Not all, but a lot of them. And I do detect a change in their attitude. I get more and more questions about how to respond to the sharp rise in violence. People are asking whether we have gone too far with reforms, whether we’ve gone too far with cutting back on cops. I’m getting many more of those questions now than I was getting three or four months ago.

**Some of the criminal justice system’s most vocal critics don’t believe that we should be turning to police to help curb violence. Do you think that there is a role for the police to play in addressing violence?**

One-hundred percent. I think they’re the first line of defense. They absolutely have a role. If we’re talking about responding to violent incidents and trying to deter violence, of course they have a role. Do they have the sole role? No. I think the responsibility for curbing violence is a city function and that all of the relevant city agencies need to be involved with that, not just the police. But I do think the police will continue to have the primary role for the foreseeable future. I think we need to think about how we structure the police. I think that needs to undergo significant reform. But I really don’t see the police being taken out of this role.

**My read of the research is that the evidence is pretty strong that proactive policing makes a difference. Do you have a different take on the research?**

Neighborhoods want cops, they understand the safety that comes from having cops, but they want much more respectful policing to address things like bias and over-aggressiveness.

Not at all. I think the research around visible policing, hot-spot policing, and precision policing all show effectiveness. But I think the second layer to the conversation has to be asking the question: How much harm is done in the execution of what the police do? And I think that's where we've gone astray. The NYPD generally gets pretty high marks for helping with violence, but very low marks on bias questions. And I think that's the problem we need to address. As I move around different communities, I don't hear a big cry to get police out of neighborhoods. What I hear is that neighborhoods want cops, they understand the safety that comes from having cops, but they want much more respectful policing to address things like bias and over-aggressiveness.

**So let's pivot and talk a little bit about the challenges of police legitimacy. What are the signs that indicate to you that there is a crisis of legitimacy for police right now?**

I've been saying now for close to a year that we're experiencing twin crises. We have a crisis of rising violence and a crisis of legitimacy. That's a toxic mix. The political manifestation of the crisis of legitimacy is when the New York City Council starts to defund the NYPD. They're doing that because the police have lost their legitimacy with the public—

**Let me just interrupt you there. The political class in our city has shifted to the left, and the movement to reduce the budget of the police is one indication of that. But I have some questions about how much the opinions of the general public have actually shifted on this issue.**

Well, one can only know the answer to that question at the next election—or by very astute polling. But what we do know is that elected officials generally engage in conduct that they believe is reflective of the desires of their constituencies. So at the very least, I think [the Council's move to reduce the budget of the police] is reflective of where some people are.

I think the position of the public keeps shifting because of the rise in violence. I don't think that the public dislikes or rejects the police as much as the actions of the City Council would indicate. But I do think there's deep concern within communities about police legitimacy, and that's being reflected. Political leadership will respond to the loudest voices. And the loudest voices right now are all about denigrating the ability of the police department to do the work that it needs to do.

Biden coming into office has created space, because the president's been saying . . . that we have to engage in reforms, but we're not throwing out the cops while doing it.

There's no question that until relatively recently, there's been a bit of a binary in the public dialogue: Either you're pro-cop or you're anti-cop. There hasn't been the room to say that there are reforms that are very needed while still arguing that there's a legitimate role for police. I think that window is now opening up, which is healthy. I find reporters asking more balanced questions. And I notice more and more of what they're printing tends to be a little more balanced. I also think, frankly, that Biden coming into office has created space, because the president's been saying what many of us have been saying, which is that we have to engage in reforms, but we're not throwing out the cops while doing it.

**One of things that the NYPD is famous for is CompStat, their computerized system that uses data to identify problem areas and promote precinct-level accountability. Is CompStat part of the solution or part of the problem when it comes to the crisis of police legitimacy?**

When it was first introduced, CompStat really was a game-changer. When Commissioner [William] Bratton came in, he understood that centralizing power at police headquarters was not an effective way to control crime in the streets. Instead, he sought to empower precinct captains who knew their own crime patterns best and give them control over the deployment of their own resources. CompStat became the way to recognize crime patterns but also to hold police leaders accountable for the extra authority they had been given. So yes, they had been given much more authority, but they were then held accountable for getting results. CompStat became a way of creating a results-driven organization.

CompStat is one of the best ways to drive change, but it's got to be measuring actual activity that's taking place. CompStat can be a way of articulating the values of a police agency by articulating what it's going to measure. In policing, the famous mantra, "inspect what you expect," reigns supreme.

I've long been a proponent of expanding the metrics so that the police department measures the things that we really want police to do to build legitimacy. . . . And I don't believe that's being done, at least not in any systematic way.

**So would your argument be that we need to change what the NYPD is counting?**

I've been saying that for years. Metrics are very important in policing. Policing agencies are quasimilitary organizations. The cops are going to do what you ask them to do. If you measure the number of summonses, arrests, et cetera, that's what you're going to get. I've long been a proponent of expanding the metrics so that the police department measures the things that we really want police to do to build legitimacy. Things such as positive interactions with the public, the ability to de-escalate conflicts, and the ability to engage in developing joint remedial plans with neighborhood leadership, et cetera, et cetera. We need to develop metrics that allow the department to take into account those sorts of police activities in addition to measuring the more traditional things that the department looks at. And I don't believe that's being done, at least not in any systematic way.

**You've written recently about the differences between having a police force and a police service. If the NYPD were to become a police service, what would the implications be out on the street?**

I think it could be huge. At the core of converting from a police force to a police service lie two notions. One, that policing agencies should be much more service-oriented, and secondly, that we need to change the composition of who we are recruiting into the agency. In a police service, in addition to looking for enforcers, we would also recruit people that have a variety of skills that are very relevant to urban policing. We would look to bring in people that understand conflict resolution, that have training in de-escalation, that understand family dynamics. We would

bring in people that have mental health backgrounds. We would bring in people that understand urban architecture. We would bring people that have social work backgrounds. We would bring in skills that are much more people-centric, much more focused around resolving issues rather than strictly enforcement.

The reason that I think that would have a beneficial impact is that we know from data that training around police bias can impact the knowledge that police have towards bias, but that it doesn't necessarily change behavior. What does change behavior is facilitating positive interaction between different groups, in this case, the police and communities of color. In the model that I'm proposing, you'd have much more interaction in a much more positive way. We know the same thing about aggressiveness: The more you interact with a given group, the less likely you are to be aggressive with that group.

There are long-term issues that the police can't address. They can't fix housing. They can't fix the schools. But there are short-term issues which the police can be trained to identify and then act as a coordinating agency to bring in the other agencies of government.

The third piece, which is premature to move forward at the moment because there is so much concern about the cops, is that I would also get the police more focused on prevention. Of all the agencies of city government, the police probably have the most consistent and in-depth look at the issues that are driving crime. Why? Because they're responding to them day in and day out. And they are interfacing with individuals that commit crimes and with the families that those individuals come from, on a daily basis. It wouldn't be too far-fetched a notion for police to begin exploring the short-term drivers of crime. The causes of crime are embedded in deep, long-term social issues: homelessness, food insecurity—

**Pause there for a second. I hear versions of this argument a lot—that what causes crime is poverty. But we've just undergone a dramatic transformation over the past 30 years in New York. Public safety has improved dramatically during those years, but we haven't made significant progress in reducing poverty. Does that complicate the idea that what's driving criminal behavior is poverty?**

I think if you look at where crime is coming from in New York, it tends to be the more impoverished areas. So I believe there's absolutely some connection [between crime and poverty]. You have youth that have suffered deep trauma because of the violence they have seen. You have schools where there is violence and instability. You have acute joblessness and an acute lack of hope.

**I don't disagree with any of that. But I guess I am skeptical about the notion that we can't make a meaningful dent in crime unless and until we somehow magically transform society and end racism and poverty and a host of other ills.**

That's good, because if you did believe that, you'd be wrong. Over the last twenty years, we have sustained reductions in crime through some very tough economic conditions in New York. What I'm suggesting is that there are two levels. There are long-term issues that the police can't address. They can't fix housing. They can't fix the schools. But there are short-term issues which the police can be trained to identify and then act as a coordinating agency to bring in the other agencies of government.

**Do you worry that the vision you're articulating can be read as essentially expanding the remit of the police at a moment when many people want to defund the agency?**

That's exactly why I say it's premature right now. But what we have failed to wrestle with is that no matter how many reforms we do, the cops are still going to be there. We're not going to disband the police department. I'm sorry, that's just not going to happen. So we really better focus on how police agencies are structured, because if we don't do that, I promise you, ten years from now, we'll be having this exact same conversation.

**I'm somewhat optimistic that in the next few years we will see a bunch of criminal justice reforms put in place. I think that we'll see significant movement toward improving police practice and shrinking the negative footprint of the police. But I guess my concern is that many people will look at this as a failure, because it will read as incremental reform rather than transformative change.**

I think there's another factor that will be part of the calculus about whether we succeed or not and whether your optimism is warranted. It is not happenstance that all the efforts that we're currently experiencing around police reform have occurred at a moment when crime was at a record low. It's not a coincidence. What I'm concerned about is that many of the good reforms that we're putting into place will be lost if violent crime continues unabated. I think you will then



see a backlash and we could see many of the reforms reversed. Already the number of people that are getting bail instead of being released on violent offenses is going up.

**But given your concern that bail reform went too far, wouldn't your argument be that this increase is appropriate?**

I'm not knocking the increase. If people are getting bail in appropriate violent offenses, I don't have a problem with that. But people are saying we should get as few people at Rikers as possible. What I'm saying is that you can't achieve that if violent crime continues to go up. What happens with violent crime over the next three or four years will have a lot to do with setting the pathway forward.

What's been lost in the public debate, because we have very short memories, is that, because of the good work of groups like the one you used to lead [the Center for Court Innovation], and numerous other nonprofit organizations, going into 2019, we had record low numbers of arrests in the city of New York, record low numbers of people at Rikers, and record low numbers of state prisoners. All of the data was trending in the right direction. Cooperation between the cops and the community was going up. The neighborhood policing program was catching on. Contrary to all expectations, cops were applying to be in that program. Things were really going in the right direction, and then it just blew up. We're now a full year into rapidly rising violent crime. Right now, violent crime is up 20 percent over last year, and last year was up 50 percent over the previous year.

[Do] people perceive that the criminal justice system writ large—police, prosecution, courts—is responding in the way it should. Or has accountability been lost?

**What do you think is the biggest misconception that the public or the media has about the uptick in violence in New York City?**

I don't think they have a misconception. I think they are perceiving the uptick quite accurately. We see crime rising on the subways. We see numerous more cases of shots being fired. The murder rate is rising. People are also correctly perceiving that we're seeing a record number of illegal guns being seized in the city. Now does that mean there are a record number of illegal guns in the city, or is it just that more guns are being seized? We don't know. But we do know

that 2020 was a record year for gun sales nationwide, and generally as gun sales go up, we see more illegal guns in New York. And 2021 is continuing to see that record rise in the sale of guns. So that's a big issue. I think people are correctly perceiving all of that. I think the question around correct perception is whether or not people perceive that the criminal justice system writ large—police, prosecution, courts—is responding in the way it should. Or has accountability been lost? I think you're seeing a rise in the sense that people can act with impunity in New York. And that's problematic, but that's something that can be reversed.

The more we can filter out racism in policing and the criminal justice system, the fairer the system will be both in reality and in perception. The more we can inject legitimacy and transparency into the system, the more the system will be accepted.

**I think there's a social justice analysis, which I largely buy into, that argues that the criminal justice system has been a tool of oppression against Black people in this country, that it has been the sharp end of the stick enforcing an unjust social order. I also think there's a lot of truth to the argument that there are conditions in the world—poverty, racism, mental illness and such—that contribute to criminal behavior. And then there's the reality of the criminal justice system, which operates on a case-by-case basis, having to assess the criminal responsibility of each individual defendant. And I feel like those two things are in tension with each other. We are asking those within the criminal justice system to hold individuals to account, but also keep in the back of their mind these larger systemic issues. How should the history of racism in this country—or the fact that, through no fault of their own, some people are poorly educated or come from dysfunctional families—how should that influence the individual cop's behavior on the street, the individual prosecutor's decision whether to bring a case, and the individual judge's decision about whether to detain a defendant?**

You know, I actually don't think they're in tension. I believe that a system that is perceived as being just, transparent, and legitimate is a system that will be more highly respected and will encourage greater compliance with the law. I think when the system is perceived as being unfair and unjust, you see increased levels of criminality.

**You've talked about the need for people to understand that they can't act with impunity. But there are many who believe that any administration of punishment is essentially racist. Maybe I'm caricaturing this argument slightly. But only slightly. I do think there are many people who feel that if the system administers a punishment, that it's doing a moral wrong.**

If that's what they're really saying, then I sharply disagree. I understand the notion that a history of racism and injustice undermines the moral integrity of the system. The challenge is to address racism and restore justice. I think it's very important for people to understand that bad acts have consequences; accountability is important. I think that's a fundamental precept in keeping order in a society. Consequences must be proportional, swift, evenly applied, and hopefully remedial. Prison should be a very last resort, reserved only for those where necessary. Consequences must be administered in a fair and just manner, without regard to race. The more we can filter out racism in policing and the criminal justice system, the fairer the system will be both in reality and in perception. The more we can inject legitimacy and transparency into the system, the more the system will be accepted. That in turn makes the individual administration of justice easier to do. I think the effort to instill justice, legitimacy, and transparency into the system reinforces the ability to treat individual cases individually and fairly. The justice system really should be about individual rights and individual responsibility. Decisions should be made on an individual basis. If we're starting to make those decisions because of fear of political repercussions or out of a desire to be politically correct, then we're undermining fundamental justice.

## Does how government discusses public safety impact public safety?

**One last question: Are there areas where you think we need more information, more data, more research? If you had an army of criminologists at your disposal, where would you point them?**

We started this conversation by talking about competing narratives. I'm fascinated with the intersection between narrative and crime. I think one of the interesting areas for someone to do some really good research is to start exploring more precisely the connections between narrative and rises or falls in crime. Put slightly differently, does how government discusses public safety

impact public safety? For instance, in a time of heightened focus on reform and curtailing police activity, if government rhetoric is exclusively around reform and the ills being addressed by the reforms, and neglects to also discuss that, simultaneously, government is keeping a sharp focus on violent crime, does this negatively impact public safety? In my view, we've lost some of the foundations of deterrence, but the research around deterrence is mixed.

Deterrence is based on a high likelihood of apprehension, i.e., the police doing their job, the certainty of prosecution, the administration of firm and swift justice. Not an emphasis on severity, but an emphasis on swiftness and certainty. We've lost some of that. What impact does that have on crime? I'd like to know the answer. If the way we narrate criminal justice policy has an impact on criminal behavior, we really need to understand that, and we need to make sure that we create narratives that have the highest likelihood of both serving justice and increasing public safety. ●

# True Equity Means Everyone's Life Has Equal Value

Shani Buggs, University of California, Davis

June 10, 2021



Shani Buggs is an assistant professor at the University of California, Davis. With a background in public health, Buggs has studied community-based violence prevention programs and public attitudes about guns and the criminal justice system. She has worked to bring her academic expertise to policy conversations, including working with the Baltimore mayor's office and providing advice to the White House on how to reduce gun violence.

The following conversation took place not long after mass shootings in Boulder, Colorado, and Atlanta, Georgia, in 2021. Buggs talks about how media coverage affects perceptions of violence. She also discusses the Cure Violence model and the role that racism and disinvestment have played in seeding violence in American cities.

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## **Greg Berman: What is your origin story? How did you get involved in this field?**

Shani Buggs: Prior to my current career, I spent a decade in corporate management. I found myself working for a healthcare firm in Atlanta that began to venture into the workplace-wellness space. I was helping individuals with lifestyle change and behavior modification. I decided that public health was absolutely where I wanted to be and that I wanted to obtain a master's in public health. So, I enrolled in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. This was the summer of 2012.

I arrived in Baltimore with a heightened awareness of violence in the city, because as I was moving from Atlanta, people expressed concern about my safety based on *The Wire*. And then, just a couple of weeks into my program, a gunman shot up a movie opening in rural Colorado, and the national media was transfixed by that tragedy. I was very aware that there were regular shootings happening in Baltimore and that it was not even garnering local attention. And so I was really shocked and outraged by the disproportionate attention and response to shootings

depending on who was shot, where they were shot, and who the media and policymakers and the general public saw as being deserving of sympathy and attention.

I happened to be at Johns Hopkins, which at the time was the one academic institution in the country that had a research center devoted to gun violence. And so I shifted my focus to gun-violence prevention. This was 2012, and the conversation about gun violence as a public health issue was still very much a fringe idea. I shifted my graduate studies and ultimately my entire career. I decided to stay at Hopkins beyond my master's program. I was accepted to the doctoral program and continued to train and work with folks in Baltimore thinking about violence reduction and prevention. For a couple of years, I worked in the mayor's office, helping the city to coordinate their violent crime reduction strategy.

**We know that some types of violence increased in many American cities over the past year. But my sense is that the pattern is not uniform—some places it's up a lot, some places it's up a little bit, and in some places it's flat. Have you taken a step back and looked at the city-by-city numbers? What jumps out at you?**

I think the thing of greatest interest is how consistently violence has spiked in cities around the country. Gun violence increased while we started to see lower rates of theft and lower rates of robbery and lower rates of rape. To your point, the data is still coming out, and we know that every city did not experience the same rate of increase, but many cities saw large spikes.

Where we saw spikes in gun violence were places that had previously experienced higher than average rates of gun violence and that had all of the social factors that are associated with gun violence—high rates of unemployment, high rates of poverty, high rates for criminal justice contact, housing insecurity, food insecurity.

There's a lot to unpack, and it will take months or years for us to really be able to untangle all of the many factors that were associated with last year's increase. I have some theories and some ideas, but it is going to take some time before we're able to really understand what was at play.

**Don't make me wait. Give me a theory or two.**

So, where we saw spikes in gun violence were places that had previously experienced higher than average rates of gun violence and that had all of the social factors that are associated with gun violence—high rates of unemployment, high rates of poverty, high rates for criminal justice contact, housing insecurity, food insecurity. The pandemic and the shutdown severed social ties and economic ties for many individuals. Different from other economic downturns, the pandemic really hit certain employment sectors and certain subpopulations differently. We've seen higher-income positions bounce back better than what we've seen for individuals who are at the lowest rung of economic opportunity and financial stability. And you also had social supports that were basically shut down. Violence intervention strategies were curbed. Job training, subsidized employment, mentoring, case management, financial assistance, social assistance—those were all shut down. And then the fear and anxiety and frustration over the coronavirus and the lack of trust in institutions among communities of color—I think all of those things came together in a perfect storm kind of way.

**I wonder whether you could talk for a second about what you see as the links between a history of discriminatory policy making and the communities where we see high rates of gun violence?**

There's a direct through-line. We have not invested in communities of color for decades. There's been research done on the relationship between redlining and the discriminatory housing practices of the 1930s and 1940s and how that relates to gun violence today. We continue to see that relationship, but we have not done enough research into that relationship. Increasingly, there are more people starting to connect historical factors to contemporary phenomena, particularly as they relate to structural racism. The communities that have been the least invested in and the least supported through financial opportunity, through housing stability, through quality educational systems, and through the development of our children—those are the same communities that are experiencing high rates of gun violence today.

**I've seen some data that suggests that there's been an increase in gun sales over the past year. Do you think that has any relationship to increases in gun violence around the country?**

It's an important question that we don't yet know the answer to. We know that gun sales have increased, but the data available do not tell us anything about who's buying the guns. Researchers are trying to better understand if the increase in gun sales translates to increases in gun violence.

I think that's still to be determined. What we do know is that in the communities that are experiencing high rates of gun violence, firearms are still far too prevalent, including firearms that were illegally possessed, illegally sold, and trafficked into these communities prior to March of 2020. We don't yet know how many more guns there are in these communities, but it was a problem before last year.

**Let's turn to Baltimore, and let's start by talking about Cure Violence. This is a violence prevention model that has generated a lot of excitement in recent years. It is also a model that can be challenging to implement. How has the model fared in Baltimore?**

The Cure Violence model, and the theory behind it, we don't know if it actually works in every community and every city. I think what we saw in Baltimore is that there were some communities where the nature of the violence fit that model, but other communities within Baltimore where it did not.

The Cure Violence model was designed in the 1990s with the understanding that violence is contagious. It was also designed with the understanding that if you can intervene with group leaders, you can then use the social and political capital of those leaders to help curb violence among their followers.

Violence has evolved in a number of different ways since the 1990s. The Cure Violence model may not fit the times any more. In many cases, you don't have structured, hierarchical groups with traditional leaders. That's not what we see today. You have much more loosely formed, smaller groups that may be fighting against each other, even though they're under the bigger umbrella of a known gang or group.

On the other hand, there are elements of the model—having credible messengers to mediate conflict and connecting individuals to services and supports to address trauma and help create lifestyle change—that are absolutely important and should be strengthened and used more widely, in my opinion.

I think in many ways, where Cure Violence had success in Baltimore, it was really on the strength of the individuals leading it and doing the frontline work. There was little city investment up until the last couple of years. The program had been supported by grants, which meant that Cure Violence was a program rather than a network of services and support. It was just kind of operating on its own. There has to be greater support, and the city just didn't provide



that for the longest time. That is changing. I'm optimistic and hopeful. Because whether it's Cure Violence, or focused deterrence, or a hospital-based violence intervention program—none of these programs can really be successful at creating sustained violence reduction without a broader infrastructure of support.

Individuals carry today because it's better to be caught with a gun than to be caught without a gun. People carry weapons because they perceive that the system doesn't keep them safe.

**You were part of a team that did some survey research about the underground gun market in Baltimore. One of the findings that stood out for me was how many of the respondents said that they carried guns for protection because they felt vulnerable.**

We did not ask for people's status, but many of these were individuals who were very likely to be legally prohibited from carrying firearms. The fact that so many carry is alarming. They carry because they do not feel safe in their communities. And they carry despite knowing that there are legal risks if they get caught, although some of the research that we've done suggests that the legal consequences of carrying in Baltimore are inconsistent. But we have also learned that increased penalties for gun carrying do not necessarily impact day-to-day behavior. The research coming out of Chicago and coming out of the Center for Court Innovation in New York has been consistent: individuals carry today because it's better to be caught with a gun than to be caught without a gun. People carry weapons because they perceive that the system doesn't keep them safe. That's the real story.

**You've expressed some skepticism about the deterrent effect of policing. You've also talked in other forums about the harms that overpolicing can do. I'm wondering whether you think that there is a role for police to play in attempting to respond to the recent increase in gun violence.**

I believe that people should be held accountable for their actions. I believe individuals who do harm must be held accountable. There needs to be deterrent effects for risky behaviors, such as carrying a firearm. I also have healthy skepticism that policing, as structured today, is the appropriate deterrent for what I've just described.

We have handed over the idea of public safety to police. All the police can do is respond after something happens. Or they can occupy a neighborhood and be visible to deter crime. But that's not what keeps a community safe. I live in Sacramento. The police aren't keeping my community safe. My community is safe because homes are stable, the environment is healthy, and there are opportunities for youth and for families. I'm not trying to paint this rosy, idyllic picture, but it's true.

We also need to be investing in researchers who are engaging in community-based, participatory research that is not just extracting information from the community or studying individuals in the community as subjects.

I think the conversation needs to focus on the fact that policing is not serving communities equally. What we have seen, over and over again, is the harm done by unethical policing. We need to be thinking about how to invest in the kinds of supports that allow for communities to stay together and stay safe and healthy. But it can't be an either/or conversation, because we still have harm being done today. And we don't have alternate systems right now other than law enforcement. If someone is harmed right now, the only number that I can call is 911. I can't access a credible messenger. I can't access a community paramedic. I can't access nontraditional mental health workers who can de-escalate or support someone who's having a mental health crisis. So we have to talk about the systems that we have today, but we also need to recognize that police don't prevent violence, police respond to violence.

**So we've talked about the need to reform the criminal justice system. I'd like to pivot and talk about the ways that your field needs to reform going forward. How do researchers need to change in order to stay relevant and to pursue an agenda that's truly responsive to the problems on the ground?**

I'll start with policing because that's where we just left off. There are communities of color that have for decades said the police do not keep us safe. We have ignored that. And even today in the conversations around what we do about policing, we're continuing to ignore a nontrivial percentage of the population that are saying these people that you keep sending my way don't

help me feel safe and they actually cause more harm. Ignoring those voices is effectively saying, “We don’t value you in the same way that we value these other voices that say keep sending the police.” That has to change. True equity means everyone’s life has equal value. We need to recognize that we have not valued a large number of people in our community. There are a number of researchers who have been centering community voices, but the field overall has not. And there are a number of reasons why that may be true. The ivory tower is a barrier in and of itself. There is also the fact that we have focused on criminal justice outcomes, as they relate to violence prevention, rather than on health and well-being. If all we’re doing is looking at whether the homicide numbers went up or down, then we’re not thinking about the societal costs of the interventions.

There’s also a problem with one- or two-year grant cycles. Some of the problems we are dealing with are decades in the making. We’re not going to solve these problems with some quick studies and some quick intervention. So we need to have long-term investments in longitudinal studies that allow for community-based, community-driven strategies to gain footing, to have growing pains, and to really support the community in ways that are healing and transformative. We also need to be investing in researchers who are engaging in community-based, participatory research that is not just extracting information from the community or studying individuals in the community as subjects.

**One of the things I have learned from doing community-based work is that communities don’t speak with one voice. Within any given community, you’ve got people who hate the police. And you’ve got people who want more police. So engaging the community is not a simple matter because the community is not going to speak uniformly about issues like safety and policing that are incredibly complicated. In the desire to listen to the folks who say, “The police aren’t making me safe,” we shouldn’t compound the error by ignoring those who say, “The police do make me safe.”**

Absolutely. It’s messy like democracy is messy. But we have to give equal voice and equal attention to the many different voices in our community and the values that they’re expressing, presuming that these are antiracist and equitable values that they’re expressing. As it relates to research, it takes time to do community-based participatory research.

It takes time to engage communities in a meaningful way. If people are saying, “I absolutely want the police,” we need to be asking them what they are getting from that safety and have

an honest conversation about that, but we cannot ignore the people who say, “The police don’t keep me safe.”

**Are you feeling optimistic or pessimistic as you look to the next year or two in terms of gun violence? You started off by saying that you were attracted to this field, at least in part, because you saw that some victims got more attention than others. Arguably we’re seeing that dynamic play out right now with a lot of attention to recent shootings in Boulder and Atlanta and not so much attention to the more quotidian victims of violence in places like Baltimore, Chicago, and New York.**

Unfortunately, it feels like we haven’t learned lessons from last year. If you look at Atlanta and Boulder, I already know more about the victims in Boulder than I know about the victims in Atlanta.

Why is that? I don’t hear the media talking about that. I don’t hear them talking about the fifteen people shot at a pop-up party in Chicago last weekend, or the five people shot in Philadelphia over this weekend. The mass shooting conversation that’s happening right now is maddening to me because the definition that is being used—four or more killed when the shooter is perceived to be a stranger—erases the trauma that is experienced from shootings that don’t meet this criteria. When multiple people are shot in any given experience, regardless if four or more die, the experience of everybody involved is not trivial. It matters. There needs to be attention and resources placed there. I’ve been disheartened by the way the last couple of weeks have played out in the media. The shootings in Atlanta and Boulder have just dwarfed the conversation about community violence.

I’m hopeful that for the first time, we will have large-scale investments at the federal level into communities, specifically for violence prevention that doesn't look like more law enforcement, more punishment, more oppression.

But there are glimmers of hope. There are conversations happening at the federal level with both the White House and Congress around investing in community violence prevention. I’m hopeful that for the first time, we will have large-scale investments at the federal level into

communities, specifically for violence prevention that doesn't look like more law enforcement, more punishment, more oppression.

Different cities around the country are thinking about how to do safety differently. How do we actually invest in people's safety rather than invest in their failure? It gives me hope. I'm hopeful that we can continue to think more broadly about what safety looks like, who deserves to be safe, and how we hold everyone accountable for wrongdoing, including those who were supposed to be in charge of making policy that keeps us safe. ●

# You Can Reduce Violence But Harm People

Caterina Roman, Temple University



July 16, 2021

Caterina Roman, a professor of criminal justice at Temple University, has spent decades researching violence and how to prevent it. Her research has evaluated reentry programs, community justice partnerships, and focused deterrence projects.

In this conversation, Roman talks about focused deterrence, one of the most prominent crime-reduction strategies of the past thirty years, asking some hard questions about how we should assess its impacts. Like Shani Buggs and Jeffrey Butts, she also offers thoughts about evaluating the Cure Violence model. And she offers a frank assessment of the state of knowledge about crime prevention: “The truth is that we know very little about what works because we don’t test prevention.”

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**Greg Berman: How concerned are you about the spike in homicides we have seen over the past year? Do you think that the increase is something that we need to be worried about?**

Caterina Roman: I think we really need to be concerned about it. I think we’ve reached some kind of a tipping point. When you look at the reasons that people generally offer for any major spike in violence, all of them come into play with COVID. You have a little bit of everything. You have so many people buying guns. You have more hurt people who will hurt people. You have disinvestment that has been exacerbated. You have governments that aren’t funding parks, rec centers, summer jobs. You don’t have in-person religious services.

You don’t have outreach workers on the streets or the typical social services. And then you have compounded stress. All of these things are coming to a head together. There’s no place to go. Young people don’t have the access to prosocial jobs that will keep them busy and put them in contact with potential mentors.

**Recent writing about the increase in violence seems to fall into two categories: an effort to score political points or a search for simple, silver-bullet answers to what’s going on.**

I talk to my students a lot about the media. I've studied fear of crime, and I often ask, "Where does that fear come from?" Some of it is based in reality, but most of it is not. Having had many conversations with journalists over the years, I know that journalists often like to focus on just one thing to hang their stories on. Some of this comes from journalism itself, which requires stories to have a hook. It is also true that policy makers tend to want quicker fixes and easier answers. If you hang your hat on one cause, you have a straight line to a solution. In reality, it's just not that simple.

Police departments have the resources to do data-driven work that can be useful in communities. Where are the hot spots? How long have they been hot? What makes them different from other areas? What have we learned from both our successes and our failures in addressing hot spots from five years ago?

**You talk about the structural forces that lead to violence, including inequality and racism. The investments that we need to make to address these kinds of problems are probably generational. But we also have a need to move right now in response to an immediate crisis. How would you advise a mayor or some other political actor who wanted to make a difference? How should we balance long-term investments with short-term strategies to quell violence?**

I think policy makers and politicians should be direct and transparent with regard to longer-term investments. Given that the world knows that poverty has some relationship to crime and that disadvantage has some relationship to crime, it would be great if policy makers and politicians would just be open and say, "We are optimistic that we can make longer term change, and we're going to do it by investing in neighborhood infrastructure. We're going to do this, we're going to tell you where the money's going, and we're going to measure the incremental change over time."

I recognize that people want a quick fix. I'm not going to tell you that I believe that X policing solution or Y law enforcement solution is an answer. But I do think that police departments

have the resources to do data-driven work that can be useful in communities. Where are the hot spots? How long have they been hot? What makes them different from other areas? What have we learned from both our successes and our failures in addressing hot spots from five years ago? This is where I would advocate for practitioner-academic partnerships because we know even the best police departments with the most data aren't necessarily applying it in a larger, theory-based way. By creating these partnerships, we can ensure that policing will be used for smart strategies and reduce the likelihood that we're sending police out on calls that have nothing to do with violence.

We're only looking at the outcomes related to police data and changes in violence at the aggregate level. We're not asking who benefits from the intervention and who is burdened. We're only focused on the data we have at hand.

**One of the problems in New York at the moment is a decline in clearance rates for homicides. Do you have some thoughts about what police should be doing to improve this?**

There's very little research out there on how to improve clearance rates. It is a huge gap in our knowledge. There's a whole gamut of programs that are trying to achieve community-level change, whether it's a focused deterrence/pulling levers model or Cure Violence or something else. I would advocate for researchers who have studied these models to go back and look at whether clearance rates were differentially affected in the treatment versus control neighborhoods. That's relatively easy to do. Maybe where there's less violence on the street and less fear of crime, clearance rates go up.

**You mentioned focused deterrence policing strategy. I'm curious to hear how you are thinking about focused deterrence these days and what we can say about its effectiveness as an intervention.**

I've evaluated focused deterrence in Washington, D.C., in its first sort of iteration right after Operation Ceasefire in Boston. And I think the big issue for me about its effectiveness is that we're only looking at the outcomes related to police data and changes in violence at the aggregate level. We're not asking who benefits from the intervention and who is burdened. We're



only focused on the data we have at hand. This tends to be what evaluators do. It's easy to get arrest data, so that's what we measure. And so we only know from the majority of evaluations of focused deterrence that it reduced violence at the aggregate level.

We just know that we got the end result of reduction in violence. But what got us there? [John Jay professor] David Kennedy's theory of change is that the threat of this very focused deterrence led to general deterrence. But we have no research that shows us that that is true. Yet everybody who advocates for focused deterrence is saying that it is an evidence-based program, that it's working and this is what we should do. I don't know if that's true.

**So, if you were going to sponsor research into focused deterrence going forward, what would that look like?**

Any intervention that expects a community-level reduction in violence has to have enough research dollars behind it to fund a comprehensive survey to track individual-level behavior change. You want to be interviewing those who are targeted in the initiative, and following up with them, and then also interviewing potential high-risk individuals in the community. This won't be cheap. You're at a million dollars right there. But that's where I believe we have to go.

If we want answers, we need to be able to conduct the kind of studies that are going to let us measure what is really happening at the community level.

For every intervention we need to be asking who benefits and who is burdened. . . . What are the unintended consequences of using credible messengers to go into the community and be prosocial mentors and caseworkers?

**You talk about people advocating for more focused deterrence. Recently, I've seen a number of calls for deeper investment in Cure Violence. Do you think that the evidence merits this push?**

I think you're asking the question in the wrong way. I think for every intervention we need to be asking who benefits and who is burdened. If you frame the question that way, I would have to think long and hard about who is burdened by Cure Violence. What are the unintended

consequences of using credible messengers to go into the community and be prosocial mentors and caseworkers? I don't think there is an obvious burden to funding Cure Violence as it's intended to be implemented, whereas there are so many things that could go wrong with focused deterrence, given its complex implementation structure. You can reduce violence but harm people.

**You are advancing a kind of “do no harm” argument on behalf of Cure Violence. But do we know that it actually does what it says it does, in terms of reducing shootings?**

I'm not sure. It's supposed to be increasing legitimacy by telling the community to be collectively accountable and bringing up the moral voice of the community. But I also think you have to ask whether focused deterrence works in the long run. Is focused deterrence successful at reducing violence if once everyone knows focused deterrence is going away, they start shooting again? Please answer that for me.

Instead of Cure Violence, you could put money into victim services to make sure that every single person that's a victim of violent crime has everything they could possibly need. Victim services are basically nonexistent in most urban communities.

**I don't want us to get locked into a focused deterrence versus Cure Violence conversation, because I don't think that dynamic is helpful.**

I wasn't arguing for one versus the other. I am using those two models as an example of investment versus policing, surveillance, and deterrence. It does not have to be focused deterrence. It does not have to be Cure Violence. I think instead of Cure Violence, you could put money into victim services to make sure that every single person that's a victim of violent crime has everything they could possibly need. Victim services are basically nonexistent in most urban communities.

**Are there other programs out there that you feel are interesting, whether or not they've been evaluated with any degree of rigor?**

Do you know about the Chelsea Hub? This is a model where community agencies work collaboratively with the police, probation, school, and victim services. Everyone is meeting weekly. Let's say I am a victim service agency and in walks someone who witnessed a shooting and that individual seems like they are in a crisis moment. That victim service agency would ask that person, "Would you be willing for me to present your case to a group of service providers to talk about how we could strategize about what you might need holistically?" So the Hub is a method to provide holistic services to people who are in some type of crisis. It could be a domestic violence event. It could be after a hit-and-run incident. It doesn't have to be violent crime, necessarily. Philadelphia is testing the model now through Temple med school. It's voluntary for the individual. It is a positive, full-investment, collaborative model that cuts across systems so you can get to the complexity of the issues and offer an array of useful services and gain individuals' trust. There hasn't been a long-term evaluation of it, but it's a very promising model. The GRYD model in Los Angeles is also worth checking out. I think they've had some impact evaluation work done that is pretty strong.

**Let's talk about some of the articles you have written. A few years ago, you wrote about gang research and how to get people to leave gangs. What did you learn?**

The point of that article was to look across three very large studies to identify the kinds of pushes and pulls that get somebody out of the gang. A "pull" is prosocial. It is anything from "my significant other doesn't want me involved in that anymore," to "my grandmother says she's not going to let me come home if I'm still hanging out with them." A pull is some prosocial opportunity, like a job, that is getting me out of the gang. A push tends to be more negative. A push can be: they were victimized, or they were incarcerated, or they have gotten tired of being roughed up by the police. But it could also be they just realized that the gang wasn't what they wanted.

**You have also looked at fear of crime in Washington D.C. Tell me about that research.**

That piece came from my interest in social capital and collective efficacy.

**How would you define collective efficacy?**

Collective efficacy is the activation of social ties and informal social control among neighbors. So we ask people, "How likely are your neighbors to help out another neighbor in need?" Or, "If

a group of teens is hanging out on the street corner, being rowdy, how likely are your neighbors to do something about it?” We aggregate information from questions like these to measure collective efficacy.

In the survey that I did in the northeast section of Washington, D.C, we looked at how collective efficacy was related to fear of crime as measured by people reporting that they were not going to go walk outside because they were worried about crime. At first, what we found jibed with the literature—older people and women tend to be more fearful. As we added different variables to the model, we looked at the interaction of collective efficacy on Black residents versus White residents. What we found was that there was an increase of fear when collective efficacy was higher among Black respondents. We did not find any significant effect among non-Black respondents. We posited that, as collective efficacy increased, Black residents in those neighborhoods were talking more and transmitting more information about violent crime and what was actually happening in the neighborhood. And that relaying of information in the neighborhood increased fear. So higher collective efficacy meant more fear for Black respondents.

**We don't have good evidence on prevention,  
because we don't research prevention.**

**What do you think is the biggest misconception that policymakers have about crime prevention?**

The truth is that we know very little about what works because we don't test prevention. We don't test prevention mechanisms like Pre-K. In Philadelphia, where I live, we have 4,000 more kids in Pre-K each year over the last couple of years. We don't know if that's going to reduce violence, because we're not testing that. So when a policymaker goes to the evidence base, they're looking at the interventions that were more likely to be evaluated. As we have discussed, policing programs are relatively straightforward to evaluate: You get crime data, that's really simple. What we're not doing is funding the kinds of survey research that would give us evidence that legitimacy is increased, that moral cynicism is reduced, that more people are integrated with their neighborhoods. We have no idea how to increase collective efficacy. That's why we can't solve the violence problem. So, going back to your question, I think what's not understood is that we don't have good evidence on prevention, because we don't research prevention.

**If you were going to make a reading recommendation to an audience that is interested in community-based violence, is there a single book or single study that you would point to?**

If someone is interested in this topic, they should spend a week with an outreach worker. They should spend a week in a victim services agency. They should be inside the neighborhood. You're not going to learn anything from a book. If you want to change a neighborhood, be inside it, and see if you can feel it.

But to answer your question about a book, I would tell you to check out the Aspen Institute's roundtable on community change, which was turned into a book edited by Karen Fulbright-Anderson and Patricia Auspos. Dennis Rosenbaum has a great chapter in there on promoting safe and healthy neighborhoods. I'd also encourage people to read Wes Skogan, a criminologist who studied policing and community change. ●

## Evidence Doesn't Seem to Play a Key Role

### David Weisburd, Hebrew University



August 18, 2021

The winner of the 2010 Stockholm Prize in Criminology, David Weisburd has published more than two dozen books and more than two hundred scholarly articles over the course of a storied career. His work has largely focused on the importance of place, demonstrating that by focusing on high-crime hot spots, police can effectively reduce crime and disorder.

He discusses that work here and also picks up on a key theme introduced by Caterina Roman: the importance of “collective efficacy,” a concept introduced by researcher Robert Sampson to describe how neighborhood trust and informal mechanisms of social control can promote safety. Weisburd also discusses the need for criminal justice researchers to engage real-life problems, and the challenges the current political climate poses to evidence-based policy making.

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#### **Greg Berman: What is the “law of crime concentration”?**

David Weisburd: That’s a term that I came up with, but I think there’s a lot of support for it. The law of crime concentration really starts with my Seattle study. A generation of studies had already documented that a relatively small group of places produce much of the crime in any given city. But what struck me in Seattle was that every year, 50 percent of the crime was produced at about 5 percent of the places. Over time, crime declined by 22 percent in Seattle, but the crime concentration level stayed the same. It was constant.

Then I did a study in Tel Aviv, and I found that about 5 percent of the streets there produced 50 percent of the crime—and that about 1 percent of the streets produced 25 percent of crime. It was pretty much the same results as Seattle. Then I did a study in New York and I found that about 5 percent of the streets produced 50 percent of the crime, and about 1 percent produced 25 percent. So that led me to articulate the “law of crime concentration.” It’s not just that crime

is concentrated, it's that it is concentrated in incredibly consistent ways. Almost everywhere I've looked, and other people as well, you get this same dynamic, at least in larger cities.

Fifty percent of streets have no crime at all in a given year. It means that you shouldn't be spreading police resources around. You should be focusing on the hot spots. Pick those streets that are problems and focus there.

**Malcolm Gladwell cites your work in his 2019 book *Talking to Strangers*, writing about the implications of the law of crime concentration for how the police should behave.**

Gladwell does a wonderful job of communicating what my research means. I think he's right about the real-world implications of this idea: we can get a lot of bang for our buck by focusing on hot spots of crime. Half of the crime is in 5 percent of the places. Fifty percent of streets have no crime at all in a given year. It means that you shouldn't be spreading police resources around. You should be focusing on the hot spots. Pick those streets that are problems and focus there. You would also do a lot less damage to citizens if you did this. There are also implications beyond policing—crime prevention, social welfare interventions, and many other programs would be much more efficient if they were focused on the streets that are very problematic.

**If the police were to focus their energies in the way that the law of crime concentration suggests, wouldn't the effect be to increase racial disparities?**

I've actually argued against that.

**Walk me through the argument.**

Let's talk about Seattle, where I've done a lot of research. There's a neighborhood in the southeast of Seattle that is disadvantaged and contains a large immigrant population. Let's say that the police were thinking about doing something there, because there's more crime in that neighborhood than other neighborhoods. They start sending out officers across the neighborhood. Well, police have a noxious side to them as well. There is a downside of policing.

They arrest people. They stop people. They use other enforcement tactics. All of this might have negative psychological and social impacts, even if in specific circumstances it is necessary to

combat crime. We know it's bad for young people to be stopped, for example. You want to use these tools sparingly. The more police there are around, the more those kinds of tools will be used.

So, if you go in and blanket the neighborhood, the police are naturally going to interact with people who they shouldn't be interacting with. That's what Gladwell talks about in his book *Talking to Strangers*. Sandra Bland wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time. Police officers should not have been stopping people there in the first place. Nothing ever went on in that spot. There was no previous pattern of crime events. There was no reason to be worried about someone driving there. The police officer just stopped her for a stupid reason because he thought she was suspicious.

My point is that a strategy that doesn't recognize hot spots will have police going across the neighborhood, interfering in the liberties of lots of people. If you use a hot spots approach, you only go to those specific small numbers of streets where the problems are focused. If you use the hot spots approach, you can lower the intrusion of police.

I think the blanket criticism of hot spots policing is ideological, not realistic. People who live on streets where there's a lot of crime know they need the police. The question is, what do the police do when they go there? They shouldn't go in like an invading army. This is not a foreign country. These are the citizens that the police work for. So the police should go in behaving in procedurally just ways. The law of crime concentration tells you where to go, but it doesn't tell you what to do when you get there. So I would say that you should focus police resources on that small number of places that produce most of the problems, but when you go there, you should use practices and procedures that will not lead to negative impacts on the public.

**In some circles, there's a strong pushback right now against procedural justice, the idea that how a person is treated matters as much as the outcome of their case or their encounter with police. Some people feel that the most zealous advocates of procedural justice have made claims that are not well grounded in science. But more fundamentally, there is a critique that procedural justice is just window dressing. You can get police officers to look people in the eye and use plain English, but at the end of the day, they are still enforcing an unfair, racist system. How would you respond to this kind of critique?**

I recently did a study in which we trained a group of hot spots officers in procedural justice,



and another group, we didn't. We found that you can train police to behave better, to care more about what people think, and to give people a sense of justice.

When people place procedural justice as the first goal of policing, as [Yale law and psychology professor] Tom Tyler and colleagues sometimes do, that's a mistake. I think it's wrong to imagine that the first task of policing is to be procedurally just. The first task of policing is to protect order, to respond to citizen requests for assistance, and to reduce crime. Police are expensive. I don't want them to just be popular. I want them to do something. I want them to improve public safety.

There's no question that procedural justice captures a mode of behavior that we want from police in a democratic society. I don't think it's only window dressing. I mean, it can be. But the hope of it is that we can teach people better ways of interacting with the public. The study I've done suggests that you can train police to be procedurally just. Why wouldn't I want that?

I don't think there's good evidence that police acting on the street in procedurally just ways will have immediate short-term impacts on perceptions of legitimacy in the community. I think it's much simpler for me. I believe the police in a democratic society have to treat people with the basic characteristics of procedural justice—fairness, justice, giving people a voice. In my view, that is exactly the way police in every community should treat citizens, irrespective of whether it has any impact whatsoever. That's the democratic way of treating citizens.

Greg, you spent a lot of time working in Red Hook. You've done research in other places. Do the people in those streets say, "I don't want the police to help me?" Or do they say, "I want the police to help me, but I want them to treat me with respect." I think that the circles you're talking about are very out of touch in terms of their attitudes towards the police. I think that in general, people living in high-crime streets want the police. They need the police. They don't want to defund the police. They don't want only policing as the solution to their problems, that's for sure. But they need the police and they know it. They just want the police to treat them with dignity and respect. I don't think that's too much to ask. Procedural justice can help us get there.

**A few years ago I reached out to you, right after the release of the National Academies of Sciences report on proactive policing that you helped put together. I thought that report was important and that it wasn't getting the attention it deserved. I'm wondering whether**

**you are frustrated with the conversation that we are currently having about policing in the United States, which to my eyes at least doesn't seem to be driven by what the evidence says.**

I think there are ebbs and flows in this process. Sometimes it seems like the role of evidence in policy is growing tremendously, and then all of a sudden it looks like things are going the wrong way. You just have to recognize this reality. There are going to be periods when there's advancement and there are going to be periods when you go back a little. My gut feeling is that overall, we're moving in the right direction. Whatever negatives may have occurred recently, there were tremendous advances before that. Maybe now with this new administration in Washington, there will be another push forward.

There was a long period when there seemed to be consensus among people on the left and the right that there is this thing called evidence, which we're going to use to help us make decisions. We're going to bring our normative backgrounds to those decisions, but we're going to pay attention to the evidence. That sort of working together seems to be falling away.

The nice thing about the evidence-based policy movement over the years was that it gained advocates on every side of the aisle. There were conservatives who wanted to listen to the evidence, and there were liberals that wanted to listen to the evidence. And those people began to have a common language to support criminal justice reform. What's frustrating at the moment is that that common language seems to be falling apart. On both sides, there are assumptions that are very hard to undo. And evidence doesn't seem to play a key role. Life is complicated. Many assumptions are not proven empirical realities.

Take stop-question-and-frisk. So, a rational conversation about stop-question-frisk might go, "Well there's mixed evidence about large-scale use of stop-question-and-frisk [SQF] across cities but there's strong evidence that pedestrian stops work in hot spots, in areas with high violence." There is also evidence that SQFs have negative medical, educational, and other social impacts on those who are stopped. There is little direct evidence of negative community reactions

overall, though there has been limited study of this issue to date. You should be able to have a dialogue about all of this. You should be able to ask, “Can stop-question-and-frisk be carried out at high-crime hot spots in a way that’s constitutional, and in a way that minimizes its negative outcomes?” Maybe it can and maybe it can’t. Maybe that strategy is so noxious that it has to go. But that sort of rational argument using evidence is very hard to have right now, because people walk in saying, “Well, I’m against it, it can’t be effective.”

**You did a great interview a couple of years ago with Cynthia Lum from George Mason University. In it, you talked about your research process. You said that your approach was to look at practice and then work backwards to the theory, or words to that effect. But I feel like a lot of what I’m seeing these days is essentially doing the reverse. Many people seem to be starting with the assumption that police involvement is wrong before they even look at the evidence.**

To be fair, people on the other side start out by saying, “The police are always right,” and “Give police more power.” It’s all very frustrating. It becomes a political fight. There’s a statement in the Talmud that essentially says: you’re not obligated to complete the repair of the world (tik-kun olam) but you’re not free not to try. We’re all obligated to try to make things better. We’re not necessarily going to achieve it, so I don’t get completely discouraged when things aren’t going well.

There was a tremendous (positive) movement from the early parts of my career through the Obama administration. There was a long period when there seemed to be consensus among people on the left and the right that there is this thing called evidence, which we’re going to use to help us make decisions. We’re going to bring our normative backgrounds to those decisions, but we’re going to pay attention to the evidence. That sort of working together seems to be falling away.

**I’m very concerned about our intellectual climate. I don’t see how we get to effective solutions if we can’t speak honestly and forthrightly in the public square. I lay a lot of the blame on Twitter and Facebook and other online forums that I think incentivize outrage and the opposite of in-depth thinking.**

It’s very difficult. I think the two of us would like to see people look at the evidence and draw some conclusions from it, recognizing that there is such a thing as evidence. There are some

facts out there that you need to pay attention to. Maybe by doing that, you get some consensus. This has in fact happened in several areas. I think there's growing consensus that there are too many people in jails and prisons, that overincarceration was a mistake. I think the evidence helped to stoke that realization. And that realization came from both liberals and from people that you would think of as conservatives.

**Another thing that you've discussed is that it is incumbent on researchers to "make the scene." What do you mean by that? And do you feel that criminologists are rising to this challenge?**

Look, when I started my career, being involved in the real world was not necessarily considered a good thing. I remember when I went to the Vera Institute of Justice in 1985 to do a project on community policing, a colleague told me, "I don't know why you would do that. This isn't academic work." In my career, I've tried very hard to break down that idea. My view was, "How could we say something about crime without actually making the scene? How could you talk about the police if you've never walked with them in the street and seen the problems they have?"

My students and others have pushed this idea very far. Anthony Braga became embedded in a police department. Anthony just won the Vollmer Award of the American Society of Criminology. I think that's wonderful. It suggests that this idea of making the scene, of understanding what's really going on, is very important.

I think if we're concerned about making the world a better place, we have to deal with the range of problems that exist. At the same time, we have to be open. You have to be willing to ask the difficult questions. People on the side of the police don't want to even consider whether the police role should be changed. I'm very willing to think about the role of police. Should the role of police be what it is now? Should there be other agencies that take on some responsibilities that we now give to the police? These are all legitimate questions we should be asking. But "defund the police"? I don't really understand how that works.

I recently completed a report for the Manhattan Institute which looked at hot spot streets in New York City. Given the tremendous crime decline over the last two decades in New York, you might think that proactive police efforts are no longer necessary. But we found that in 2020,

over 1,100 street segments had at least 39 crime reports in a year. The average number of crimes for the 1 percent of streets that produced about a quarter of the crime problem was over 70 crime reports. This suggests that there are many streets that need immediate police attention. That doesn't mean that policing is the only response we should have, but we have to recognize that many streets need help in dealing with crime problems and that police have a role to play.

**Talk to me about what you see as alternative approaches to policing that might make sense.**

Not long ago, I published an article with colleagues in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* that said that mental illness is much higher on hot spot streets. I thought that was really interesting. There are many people on hot spot streets that have mental health problems like posttraumatic stress syndrome and depression. I said, "What happens if we tried to do something where we had the police and mental health social workers go to these streets together? Because that would be a way for the police to show that they're interested in the health of the place and not just enforcement."

I went to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and received a grant to run a pilot program in a few sites with the Baltimore City Police Department. We had social workers and police go out together on the street. These hot spot streets in Baltimore are really tough. We were shot at multiple times doing the data collection for a large National Institutes of Health (NIH) project on Baltimore crime hot spots. The social workers would never have gone out to these locations on their own because they would have been afraid. Putting them with a police officer made them feel safer. Together, they went door to door and said, "We're here to try to help people get the services they need." One of the ideas was that this would be a way for the police to get to know people in the street and for people to see the police in a more positive framework. This would also hopefully lead to police gaining more information on crime and more cooperation from the public.

Anyway, we carried out the study, and we got some very interesting results. The social workers and the cops were shocked that the people in the street wanted to hang out with them. They were able to help a number of people get needed services, and the police were able to get to know people on streets that they normally avoided except to engage in enforcement actions.

We observed lots of good things qualitatively. I still think it's a good program, but we haven't

been able to get [additional] funding [for it] anywhere. The difficulties we have had in getting support for this idea reinforces my sense that there is a lot of talk about changing policing, but there is often little investment in programs that go beyond traditional enforcement efforts.

### **Are there other things we should be trying?**

Right now, I'm pushing the idea of seeing whether we could develop a program to increase collective efficacy on high-crime streets. This could help communities solve some of their own problems. I believe this would also improve relationships between the police and the public.

What I'm talking about here is Rob Sampson's collective efficacy idea. Rob, a sociologist from Harvard, basically said that when people who live in a community trust their neighbors, and when they believe that they should respond cooperatively to problems in the community, that reflects high collective efficacy. The theory is that streets in which you have higher collective efficacy will exercise informal social control over criminal behavior. That's also part of broken windows theory and social disorganization theory.

If everybody's so upset at what the police are doing,  
shouldn't we be thinking about different ways of  
dealing with crime problems?

A few years ago, we did an NIH study in Baltimore in which we looked at hundreds of streets and then collected three waves of survey data with thousands of individual respondents. We asked people whether they trust their neighbors. Some of the differences we found were really large. On the hottest crime blocks, less than 50 percent of people trusted their neighbors. On the lowest crime blocks, 85 percent of people trusted their neighbors.

### **What's the direction of causality there, though? Or does it matter?**

It does matter. It could be that collective efficacy reduces crime or it could be that low crime causes collective efficacy. It's very hard to disentangle that. But we do know that they are strongly correlated. In our statistical modeling we have tried to address the causality question, and our analyses published in *Prevention Science* suggest that it is very much the case that collective efficacy influences crime.

If we're looking for alternative ways of promoting safety, besides just throwing the police at these problems, collective efficacy is an idea that is worth pursuing. I am pursuing a program now with the director of a government crime prevention agency in Israel, Yamit Alfassi. She has a number of civilian employees who support crime prevention in Rishon LeZion, a moderate-sized Israeli city. We're going to send these people to crime hot spots. Their job will be to get people organized so they understand the problems and then work together to solve them. Maybe it's garbage or graffiti or kids hanging around on the streets. There are other departments besides the police to deal with those problems, and we are hoping that this effort will empower citizens who live on hot spot streets and increase their efficacy for solving problems. And if hot spot communities are better organized, they can also deal with the police in a more effective way. I think quite often police get in trouble because they are dealing with individuals. When they're dealing with communities, they actually do better.

**Pause there for a second. When you say that cops do better dealing with communities than individuals, what do you mean?**

What I mean is, when cops decide there's a problem and they go to solve the problem on the street, they sometimes forget about the importance of working with the public. In a democracy, you need the consent of the public. It's hard for individuals to provide this kind of consent. They can make complaints, of course, but if you get a block association together, it's a different story. They can call the police, which now gives the police legitimacy. And they can also have input about how the police are behaving.

**Liz Glazer, the former head of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice in New York City, says that we have defaulted to the police to perform various tasks in part because they are a well-resourced, paramilitary agency that, for all of its faults, does tend to get stuff done when asked. In a place like New York, maybe we've put too much on the shoulders of police because we don't have faith in other government agencies like the New York City Housing Authority to actually function effectively.**

Maybe other agencies are less effective. That might be part of the problem. The police are sometimes efficient and effective, I agree with that. But the police are not the right organization to deal with some types of problems. You don't bring a sledgehammer to a problem that maybe doesn't need a sledgehammer. The police have gotten into trouble because the government, and

the people, don't want to fund all of the things that need to be funded if you're not going to use the police. If everybody's so upset at what the police are doing, shouldn't we be thinking about different ways of dealing with crime problems? My sense is that all of the talk about alternatives to policing is just talk. What it would take is a large public investment in something else. For some reason, I don't see that happening.

**What do you think of Patrick Sharkey's idea that neighborhoods with nonprofit organizations are associated with lower rates of criminal behavior?**

That grows out of Rob Sampson's work. Sharkey looks at things at a community level. I look at things at a street level. So the idea that NGOs can play a role, I think that's right, but I would focus them on the hot spots. By the way, that's one of the problems that we've had in trying to implement this idea—community organizations can't seem to wrap their minds around the idea that they should be focusing on specific streets. They think their job is to serve the entire community: "How can I focus on specific streets? The whole community needs me." I think these community groups to some degree are wasting their energy. You need to concentrate your resources on those places that need it. It's the same problem with the police. When the police think of themselves as a community resource, they fail. They need to think of themselves as a resource for the specific places where they're needed.

A halfway house is better than a prison. But America didn't want to invest in those kinds of things. Americans don't like to pay more taxes. They don't want to pay for these types of interventions.

I think what Sharkey and I are talking about is the same thing, I'm just doing it on a micro level. Informal social controls should absolutely be enhanced. But that does not take away from the need for the police. You're not going to have community organizations deal with the mafia, with drug dealers, with killers. I mean, there are people who are just bad. Not everybody committing crime is bad, but there are some people where the police are particularly needed. When people are repeatedly violent, when they're threatening people, you can't expect the community to deal with that problem. That just doesn't work.



The good part of the defund-the-police movement is the recognition that we have to invest more in other ways of producing safety. I think it's been bad for the police to get every job that every other agency fails at. The police should be reducing their footprint in those areas.

In schools, for example, I believe the police should be reducing, not increasing, their footprint.

That will be good for the police, too, I think. There are many places where we could invest in other sorts of interventions.

In Israel, you still have many halfway houses and other community facilities for kids that leave their parents, for drug addicts, for young delinquents, and for people with mental health challenges. But in the U.S., we've gotten rid of all those things. A halfway house is better than a prison. But America didn't want to invest in those kinds of things. Americans don't like to pay more taxes. They don't want to pay for these types of interventions. What I would hope is that people will recognize that we shouldn't defund the police. But we should decide how much budget the police should have. And we should be funding other efforts too.

**I think we are already seeing a lot of policing reform happen at the state and local level. And I think Black Lives Matter has clearly opened a lot of eyes and changed a lot of hearts and minds. So, to my way of thinking, Black Lives Matter has already been a success. But my fear is that for lots of people who are invested in this issue, the goal seems to be the end of racism and the elimination of any bad encounters between Black people and the police. And that seems to me impossible. My fear is that success will end up feeling like failure to a lot of people.**

Black Lives Matter was a great thing because it captured the idea that Black people are suffering in the system, and they're suffering in a way they shouldn't be suffering. America has a system, from the time you wake up in the morning to the time you go to sleep, that basically disenfranchises many Black people. I'm not saying all Black people. And I'm not saying Black people have not made progress in American society over the last generation. But there is a system there, from housing to employment to education to you name it, that sort of draws Black Americans into the criminal justice system.

If, in the end, Black Lives Matter leads to reform of the police in positive ways, and it leads to the development of other mechanisms to help control some of the problems the police are dealing with, then I think that's great. But if you want to completely alter American society, you're probably not going to get there.

What frightens me is the idea that there's a lot of focus on policing now, but it's not going to really lead to fundamental change. In fact, it's going to lead to worse outcomes in the community. It's going to reduce public safety, because the police are going to be reduced, they're going to be stigmatized, or whatever. And at the same time, communities are not going to pay for those other things that are necessary that would help in terms of increasing control in the community.

The problem with ideologues is they're so certain that what they're doing is right. This applies to Black Lives Matter and it applies to Republicans. It applies to everyone. The minute you start bringing in facts, it makes things more complicated and nuanced. There is a lack of introspection that we really need to be wary of. I think it was John Maynard Keynes, the economist, who once said that policy makers don't like evidence, because it makes making decisions harder. But the outcomes of such "harder decision making" will be much better. That is the idea of evidence-based policy. ●

## **We Have a Lot of Damage to Undo**

### **Jeremy Travis, Arnold Ventures**



September 21, 2021

Over the course of a career that began more than fifty years ago, Jeremy Travis has played a number of prominent roles, both inside and outside government. These include his service as a deputy commissioner at the New York Police Department in the early 1990s, when violent crime rates began to plummet, as a high-ranking official in the Justice Department in Bill Clinton's presidential administration, and as the president of John Jay College. Today, Travis is the executive vice president for criminal justice at Arnold Ventures, where he oversees a portfolio of grants that seek to advance racial justice.

In this interview, Travis reflects on his career and the current "once-in-a-half-century" movement to reform criminal justice in the United States. He evaluates the impact of the "broken windows" theory, responds to critics of focused deterrence, and appraises the current state of criminal justice research.

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**Greg Berman: You recently told me that you went to New York City criminal court to mark the 50th anniversary of your first visit to criminal court. Tell me what you saw. What was the same, what was different?**

Jeremy Travis: So the goal, very selfishly, was to take the occasion of the 50th anniversary of my starting in the criminal justice world to engage in a period of reflection. I spent a day in arraignment court at 100 Centre Street in Manhattan. Compared to my first days at 100 Centre Street, there were some pretty profound changes, starting with metal detectors at every door, which did not exist in 1971. I found the whole security apparatus at the front door of the courthouse really alienating and startling.

The other big change, of course, was that I was there in the midst of the pandemic. So the arraignment court was empty, except for the judge, court officers, and police officers. Fifty years ago, when I was working for the Legal Aid Society, I was struck by the vitality of the courtroom.

Every day, I would see people in moments of intense anxiety and distress. That kind of human drama was nonexistent because of the pandemic. Instead, there was a disembodied arraignment process with a judge speaking to a defendant on a screen in front of him. The defendant was in the holding pens behind the courtroom, speaking to the judge through a laptop. The judge was really good at trying to make a human connection through the technology, but it was a disembodied experience.

Sitting in the courtroom was a strong reminder of the ways in which our apparatus of justice, starting with the police, squeezes a lot of human drama—and claims from ordinary people that their government should help them—into the box of each individual case. In the midst of a once-in-a-half-century reform movement, how do we pay attention to that reality? How do we make sure that we do not lose sight of the very real experiences of people who have been harmed? In court the other day, there was a sexual assault case, there was a shoplifting, there was a street mugging. These are all very real circumstances that come into the courtrooms of our country. How we respond best to them is always the question of justice.

**Do you feel like there is a disconnect between the once-in-a-half-century criminal justice reform movement that you mentioned and the adjudication of the individual cases that you saw in the courtroom the other day?**

My meditation of the day was being reminded of the daily reality of courts, and police, and crime, and the individual injuries and harms that are being suffered. Over the last fifty years, we've constructed an enormous criminal justice apparatus. Do I doubt for a minute the importance of the reform movement that is focused on undoing that system? Not for a minute. Do we all need to be reminded that there are real people who are hurting, who are demanding some sort of response to their situation? Absolutely.

I think the Square One Project for me is an acknowledgment that we have a lot of damage to undo and a lot of racial harm to come to terms with. But at the end of the day, wherever that reimagination process leads us, there will always be instances of people coming into the courts of our country where something should be done. It shouldn't be exactly what we're doing now.

We have to be much less punitive in our response and much more restorative in resolving our conflicts. Ultimately, we need to have a response that promotes individual and community well-being. We've gone so far off course. We are now in a period of fundamental course correction

where we have to recognize the harm that we've done and undo many of the policies that have promoted this era of punitive excess.

That's the challenge right now: to think carefully about what might be driving violence and about what we now can do that we didn't know to do before. In particular, we need to avoid overreacting by increasing sentences and sending more people to prison, which is what we did in the '80s and '90s.

**You cut your professional teeth at the Vera Institute of Justice during what was an incredibly fertile moment for the organization. I would put Vera's accomplishments during that era up against just about any nonprofit that I can think of. What was it like to be at Vera back then?**

Vera was a high-energy, high-purpose organization when I was there. I am who I am today because of Vera. I'm very clear about that. It was a place where ideas mattered and where people took reform seriously. We cared about the outcomes and results. We were working at the cutting edge of a national reform movement. The two initiatives that I was privileged to be part of—bail reform and victim assistance—have now evolved into the New York City Criminal Justice Agency and Safe Horizon, which are major players in the criminal justice landscape of New York today. We're so lucky that Vera had this philosophy of creating demonstration projects and spinning them off. That's Vera's legacy.

So being at Vera was an exciting time. It was also a time when there were a lot of different perspectives in the same room. We had sociologists, lawyers, police officers, formerly incarcerated folks, all around the same table talking about things like bail reform and victim assistance. It was a great way for a young person to get an education.

**I first met you in the early '90s, when you were at the NYPD. At the time, the murder rate was peaking at more than 2,200 homicides per year, and the crack epidemic was still raging. It felt like a time of crisis. What was it like to be at the NYPD during those years? And how would you compare that time to our current moment, where the spike in violence has many people afraid that we are heading back to the bad old days?**

We didn't know in 1990 that we would be a year or two away from the peak of the violence in New York. On the contrary, we couldn't see any end to the increase in violence, both in New York and nationally. The rise in violence, and homicides in particular, had been very steep. This was the era when people were using words like "superpredator" and predicting a coming blood-bath. It was a time of hyperbole that was really damaging. But the underlying reality of a significant increase in violence in America was undeniable. In New York, we peaked with a murder count of 2,245.

I don't celebrate the relatively modest decline in the prison population in New York. I think we should accelerate it, then celebrate. I think we should be much more aggressive and much more creative in thinking about how to end the era of mass incarceration in our state. That's work left to be done. I'm very impatient with where we are right now.

In the first year of Mayor David Dinkins's administration, there was a call from the *New York Post*: "Dave, Do Something!" Dinkins did something that was very important, which was to seek approval from the state legislature to increase our taxes to pay for more police officers. It was a remarkable political moment when you think about it. There was deep concern about our city's future viability. It was a very trying time for civic life in New York. Businesses were leaving. People were leaving. There was a sense of concern bordering on despair.

Looking back, you could say that there was a natural life course to the epidemic of violence. But I'd like to think there was some human agency involved as well. Police departments responded. Other parts of civil society also kicked in to say, "We're not going to take this." But that took some doing. The addition of police officers took some time. The mayor who benefited from that was mostly Rudolph Giuliani, not Dinkins.

The political moment of deciding that we couldn't go on with this level of violence was something that has been seared in my memory ever since. When I compare that reality to today's, the numbers are very different. We're starting from a much lower base today. Starting in '91 and

'92, violent crime in New York started to decline. Basically, it has come down almost every year since then, except for the last year. Now, we have seen an increase. Not in all crime, but in gun violence, which is very troubling, because what we're talking about is lost lives. That has to be of concern to everybody. I have been very clear in speaking to others in the reform movement: we need to forthrightly acknowledge the reality of this spike, which is coming upon us very quickly. Depending upon the city, we've seen 10-percent, 20-percent, 30-percent, 40-percent increases in homicides.

It's a concern on two levels. One is the loss of life. We have to figure out what to do about it. But the other concern is that this has played into resistance to the criminal justice reform movement. It provides an opportunity for people to say, "Well, those reform ideas are responsible for the spike in violence." That is not true, so we have to be in myth-busting mode here. But we also need to have both a hypothesis as to what's causing the violence increase and a response to it that saves lives.

### **What's your theory about what's behind the spike in shootings?**

There are some hypotheses floating around, not one of which has sufficient explanatory power for me. Are there more guns? Yes. Is that what's causing a spike in violence? I doubt it. Are there more people being released from jail? Yes. Is that causing a spike in violence? I doubt it.

The hypothesis that to me has the greatest potential for helping us understand what's going on is very much derived from my understanding of the crack epidemic. Our current pandemic has been highly disruptive of community life, as was crack. The pandemic has taken young people away from prosocial environments like schools and afterschool programs. It has created stress and anxiety within our entire society, but particularly in communities that are living at the margins. It has caused police to withdraw from communities, for self-protective reasons related to COVID infection but also because they're not feeling appreciated at the community level.

All of these forces have resulted in a loss of support for prosocial, prosafety forces at a community level. Unfortunately, I think we're going to be here for years with an increased level of violence. It is not going to be an easy fix. The good news for me is that in the years since the crack epidemic, we've learned so much about what might work and what might not. We have the ability now to put together a menu of strategies that's quite different from what we put together in the late '80s or early '90s. That's the challenge right now: to think carefully about

what might be driving violence and about what we now can do that we didn't know to do before. In particular, we need to avoid overreacting by increasing sentences and sending more people to prison, which is what we did in the '80s and '90s. Hopefully, we can come out of this both smarter and safer.

**Back to the '90s for a second. One piece of the puzzle that you didn't mention was that future NYPD commissioner William Bratton was starting to employ a “broken-windows” orientation to law enforcement as chief of what was then the city's Transit Police Department. What did you think of broken windows then and what do you think of broken windows now?**

Page for page, the broken windows article by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling has had more impact than any other scholarly article in our field. It's an idea that has sort of swept policing and, more broadly, public discourse.

Hopefully, over time, we'll figure out how to do right by people coming out of prison. That extends into doing right by them when they're still in prison.

I think it's important to come back to the core idea of what broken windows is about: that order matters. People want to feel safe in their community. They want to be able to go about their business feeling that their neighborhood is safe and that things are being attended to. The broken window metaphor is a powerful one.

The hypothesis within broken windows, which Kelling always said was a hypothesis, is that conditions of disorder, if left unaddressed, lead to more serious crime, and that addressing those conditions would lead to less crime. If you look at the academic literature over the last twenty years, that hypothesis has been challenged and, with a few exceptions, largely disproven.

But the core idea of broken windows—that government should respond to people's concerns around issues of safety and well-being—is very strong to me. So what does that mean? That means the government should respond when there's somebody who's mentally ill. Government should respond to vacant lots. Government should respond to issues of excessive noise.

Addressing those concerns will lead to a better quality of life for the community—an improved sense of well-being and feelings of safety—which is, by itself, a positive outcome.



The risk of the broken-windows theory, and we've seen this play out, is when broken windows became "Broken Windows Policing." The idea moved from a compelling theory to a way of driving the deployment of police resources. We saw lots of unfortunate outcomes grow out of this, particularly when it came to stop-and-frisk. There's a trajectory here. Broken windows starts as a good idea. But then broken-windows policing becomes a way to rationalize aggressive police enforcement activities which were damaging, particularly to young people of color. Along the way, we lost the core idea—that government, not just the police, is responsible for working with communities to provide order and safety.

My North Star has always been a comment made by Herman Goldstein, father of problem-oriented policing, in a series that I hosted at NIJ called Measuring What Matters. At one point, we were talking about the metrics of success for policing. When asked what metrics he would recommend, Herman said, we should measure the success of policing one problem at a time. It's the problem that matters, not the metrics of police activity. It's not the number of stops. It's not the number of arrests. For me, Herman hit the nail on the head, as he so often did in his own quiet way. When broken windows got married to the metrics of enforcement activities, that's when we saw things go off the rails, in my view. The metrics became what mattered, rather than the problems.

**Earlier, you framed the last fifty years as a kind of failure, as an era of punitive excess. Maybe this is a New York-centric worldview, but I have a counternarrative, which is that the last thirty years or so have been a time of enormous success for the criminal justice system. This was a story that you yourself talked about in a 2019 speech at New York Law School. In that speech, you documented not just the remarkable crime reduction that New York has experienced over the past thirty years, but a pretty significant incarceration reduction as well.**

Well, the reduction has to be seen against the backdrop of the ramp-up of incarceration that took place both here in New York and nationally. There was a significant increase in incarceration rates, from which we're now making a decline. We have to tell both parts of the story. Do we call the ramp-up a success? Not in my book. Not by a long shot. In responding to crime, we have to use the deprivation of liberty carefully, surgically, and parsimoniously, to use my favorite word. We can't reflexively say that we're going to be "tough on crime" and put more people in prison for a longer period of time. That to me is a policy failure of the first order. Forget the enormous financial cost, the cost is harm to communities and harm to families.

So I don't celebrate the relatively modest decline in the prison population in New York. I think we should accelerate it, then celebrate. I think we should be much more aggressive and much more creative in thinking about how to end the era of mass incarceration in our state. That's work left to be done. I'm very impatient with where we are right now.

The jail story is different. In New York City, the jail reductions have been staggering. When I worked for Koch, we had twenty thousand people in jail. Today, as we sit here, the number is around five thousand. The Lippman Commission is hoping that it will go down even further. We are approaching European-level jail incarceration rates [which are lower than American rates]. And let's not forget the reductions in youth prisons in New York State. The Close to Home initiative of Governor [Andrew] Cuomo and Mayor [Michael] Bloomberg—started by Governor [David] Paterson and the task force that he asked me to chair—was an uncelebrated, staggering success story.

**After leaving the NYPD, you joined the Clinton administration as the director of the National Institute of Justice. How do you feel when you see activists these days point to the 1994 Crime Bill and say that it was responsible for the rise of mass incarceration?**

It's a misreading of history to say the '94 Crime Act is responsible for the era of mass incarceration. The National Academy of Sciences traces the rise of incarceration back to the early 1970s. The incarceration rate went up every year up until 2010. The '94 Crime Act happened along the way and did play a minor role in the ramp-up, but no fair reading of history can make the case that the '94 Crime Act was responsible for mass incarceration.

As a Democrat, Bill Clinton saw the political necessity of running on a platform to do something about crime. His response was to increase the size of police departments and to advance community policing as a different way to police. His response resonated with me. I thought it was politically astute.

There is a part of the crime act that I've critiqued, which was the truth in sentencing part of the act, which did provide financial incentives to states if they would change their sentencing statutes to move back the date of eligibility for parole to a longer percent of the maximum sentence, 85 percent typically. That has to be seen as one of the great perversions of federalism: the federal government paying states to keep citizens in prison longer. But in terms of the impact on incarceration rates, we have to remember that many states did not take the federal

government up on this offer. In terms of the overall contribution to mass incarceration, it was very small.

**One of the big things that you worked on when you were part of the Clinton administration, and then subsequently at the Urban Institute, was the challenge of individuals coming back to the community after a period of incarceration. You helped to popularize the idea of reentry. As you look back now, from a distance of twenty years or so, where do you think we are in terms of rethinking the reentry process?**

I was struck by the bipartisan appetite for a policy discussion about new ways to improve reentry outcomes across the country. When the Clinton administration left office, George W. Bush came in and embraced the reentry agenda. They decided that money should be allocated in all fifty states to develop reentry councils to bring workforce development folks and health folks and corrections officials together to come up with reentry plans. So in a relatively short time, it really took hold in an impressive way. When Attorney General Janet Reno and I and others first started this work, there was very little discussion about reentry. The word didn't exist. In a short time, this idea really took hold.

I'm not sure it's worse today than in 2008, or that what I described in 2008 was any different from what you would say in the decades before that. I think what is new is the public discussion about race in the operations of the justice system.

One of the hopes that I and others had in doing the work on reentry, which I continued at Urban for the four years I was there, was to call attention to the reality that everybody in prison eventually comes home. By doing that, we wanted to highlight the reality that each of these people in prison is a human being—somebody's father, son, sister, brother. These returning citizens, as we now call them, are entitled to our support because of their humanity. The journey from prison to community is a tough road.

There's still a long way to go. Has the parole system changed? Has supervision changed? Has our approach to the supports needed for people coming out of prison—has that changed? Not much. Parole, in my view, needs to be reimaged. Hopefully, over time, we'll figure out how to

do right by people coming out of prison. That extends into doing right by them when they're still in prison. We need to involve their families and communities in very different ways so that the return home is a welcome home, rather than a drop-off, which is too often the case.

**One of the consistent through lines in your career has been your interest in the challenge of race. In a 2008 speech, you said, “The day-to-day operations of our system of justice now penetrate so deeply into communities of color that we are at risk of undermining basic respect for the rule of law.” That seems prescient to me. It feels like something has broken between the justice system and the Black community, or at least segments of the Black community.**

I'm not sure it's worse today than in 2008, or that what I described in 2008 was any different from what you would say in the decades before that. I think what is new is the public discussion about race in the operations of the justice system. I'm very encouraged by this discussion. It's raw and it's uncomfortable for lots of people. It requires a discussion about history and about present-day harm that is sometimes very difficult. But we need to have those discussions. We really, really do.

I talked in that speech about the rule of law and respect for the rule of law. That's a big concept. It really is the relationship between government and the governed. [Yale law professor] Monica Bell has a phrase for this, which I find very useful, which is “legal estrangement.” Monica's phrase is so powerful. There is a deep estrangement between Black communities and their government, particularly around law enforcement. It goes back decades. Why should we be surprised that this divide exists when the agencies of the law have done so much harm, whether it's beating civil rights protesters or arresting lots of young men and taking them off to prison or other examples of police brutality.

There's now a call for a reckoning with that history. So we're tearing down statues of Confederate generals. We're thinking deeply, thanks to Bryan Stevenson, about the history of lynching. Let's not forget that the Tulsa race massacre included moments when law enforcement officers allowed the mob to take people out of a jail to lynch them. Many lynching stories start with a judge or a jailer allowing that to happen. So it's hard to have respect for the rule of law when the law allows such things to happen.

I think the fundamental question is what, if anything, can government do to bridge this divide and to counteract the realities of legal estrangement. The burden shouldn't be placed on the

Black community to do that work. Of course, they're welcomed to this discussion. But it's really upon those who have worked in government, as I have, to ask some pretty deep questions about what we've done. Have we caused harm? That discussion is very uncomfortable for many of our colleagues.

**Over the years, you've chosen to make a deep professional investment in the focused deterrence model. In recent months, I've been talking to a fair number of academics who seem to have an ax to grind with focused deterrence. Have their criticisms reached your ears? And if they have, how do you respond to them?**

The criticism has been around for as long as focused deterrence has been around.

At its core, focused deterrence is, as its name implies, a very focused look at a small number of individuals who are involved in the dynamic of violence in their communities. Focused deterrence engages with those individuals very directly, with an acknowledgment of concern on behalf of the community. The message is that we care about you, and that we want you to live. Alongside that message is an offer of assistance from the service providers who are part of this program. At the same time, there is also a statement about consequences—that if the violence continues, there will be consequences. What I like about the model is the focus on a small number of individuals with clear communication.

**The research shows very strongly that the focused deterrence intervention reduces violence and saves lives.**

In the program's early days, there was this celebrated case—in Boston, I think—where somebody was sent off to prison for a long time for possessing a bullet. To me, that is excessive. That runs counter to my general beliefs about overreach of state power. The missing part of focused deterrence in its early formulation was some sense of true community engagement. There have been efforts over the years to build up the community engagement piece of the model. Some cities are more successful at that than others.

But research is the beginning and ending point of my analysis here. And the research shows very strongly that the focused deterrence intervention reduces violence and saves lives. All the

metrics that we care about are going in the right direction under focused deterrence. So I would consider focused deterrence to be a necessary part of every crime strategy. Ideally, there will be a combination of strategies that a city can deploy to reduce violence. I hope we are now beyond a point where people have to pick and choose between focused deterrence and Cure Violence or some other type of intervention. I think we're on the cusp of an era where all of these can be thought of as being mutually supportive.

What President Biden is doing is just along these lines. We need police and we need community interventions. We shouldn't be pointing fingers at each other. The police have a lot to learn about how to be humble and how to share the table with others. Community groups have something to learn about working effectively with the police. And the research community has a lot to learn about how to do research in a more comprehensive sort of way.

**Like you, I'm a believer in trying to reduce the use of incarceration. I'm also a believer in the core insight of the broken windows theory that maintaining a sense of public order is important. So help me think through what we should be doing about public urination, aggressive panhandling, public drinking, and the kinds of cases that we used to call quality-of-life offending. If we're not going to respond to those offenses with a criminal justice sanction, or even a fine, how do we as a society communicate that we don't want people to be engaging in these behaviors in the public square?**

Well, the first answer is we don't communicate that only through the power of arrest. We like to turn to the police to solve all of our social problems. Sometimes that's the right thing to do, but often not. We need to expand the menu of options.

One of the things I'm very proud of is the work that we did through the Misdemeanor Justice Project. We brought public attention to the fact that criminal summonses were being issued for really minor offenses. The response of the [New York] City Council, thankfully, was to transform those from criminal summonses to civil summonses. That, to me, was a very important step in the right direction. We then run into some more complicated questions, such as what do you do with somebody who continuously thumbs their nose at those summonses?

**As you know, in New York, you have people engaging in this behavior not once or twice but on dozens of occasions.**

At some point, I think that's when I would say, okay, that pattern of behavior does warrant a criminal sanction. But even then, arresting somebody for a minor offense, what does that allow you to do as a criminal justice response? Not much. A night in jail, maybe.

**Pause there for a second because I feel like the conversation about this often focuses on individual deterrence, as opposed to general deterrence. Maybe you will disagree, but I think there is value in sending a message not just to the individual involved in something like public urination but to the people that are seeing this behavior on their streets.**

Again, this is a claim on government. The public is saying to their government, "Do something." We need more tools in the toolbox. The way that you and I know each other best is through the work of the Midtown Community Court and other problem-solving courts, which expand the responses available to judges to deal with individual circumstances and needs. That should be commonplace across the system.

Now we get to a larger social policy question about the shortfall of mental health services, of employment, of job opportunities. The entire social safety net in this country is very weak, unfortunately.

**This next generation is responding to the call to make things better. That's not just the research community but the legal community and the advocacy community. The people are now literally in the streets calling for change.**

Channeling Herman Goldstein, I would start by asking what's going on with that individual who is engaged in public urination? What's the problem? I tend to believe in the value of assessing the underlying dynamics. How did that person go off course? What is the best intervention for that person? How can we provide that? In New York, police can now bring somebody to a center instead of the precinct. They can get a bed and stay overnight. They can work on issues of addiction.

But we still don't have enough options in our toolkit. We need more alternatives for low-level misconduct that send the signal, which is so important, that this conduct is not welcomed. It doesn't mean that we exile somebody. We would rather help you than jail you.

**In a 1998 speech that you made at John Jay College, you bemoaned the state of criminal justice research. You faulted the field for not having good answers to the question of why crime had declined. You also characterized researchers as scoffing at the idea that police could have any impact on crime. I'm curious to hear what your sense of the state of the field is today. Has the state of criminal justice research improved since '98?**

No question, it is better now than it was then. We have a long way to go, particularly in terms of our data infrastructure. We don't have the ability to track events in real time. We're feeling that loss right now as we try to understand this spike in gun homicides.

But I think the research community has made great strides since 1998. We now have the ability to look at our history of incarceration, in particular, and think about the trends. In the Square One Project, we start each one of our roundtables with a paper by a historian, to try to help us understand our own history.

The interest in criminal justice is high right now. It is front and center in the national discussion. Every presidential candidate on the Democratic side had something to say about criminal justice reform. That's never happened before. So it's high on the agenda and that means that emerging scholars are turning their attention to these issues. I think there's still a narrowness in some of the criminal justice research that is very system-centric, rather than looking at the larger societal forces. That's unfortunate. We miss the proverbial forest for the trees too often. But we've come a long way. The federal funding for research has made a big difference.

People now want to go into criminal justice reform in large numbers. People are dedicating their lives to justice reform because the injustices are so vivid and so palpable—both through human stories but also through the data. This next generation is responding to the call to make things better. That's not just the research community but the legal community and the advocacy community. The people are now literally in the streets calling for change.

**In preparing for this interview, I went back and read many of the things that you have written over the years. One of the qualities that comes across most powerfully in your writing is a certain earnestness. I'm wondering whether that is intentional. If you were going to point to the values that you are trying to put forward in your writing and your speechmaking, what would be on that list?**



Above all, independent inquiry: taking a close and honest look at some of the issues that we face, most broadly in our society but more specifically in the criminal justice system. I have always tried to step back and take an independent look at a question or a trend or a policy proposition so that we can make it better. The goal is always progress, improvement, having government that works, and making things better for people and for communities. As I'm reflecting on a long, long journey, what I've always wanted to do is to be in the fray, but removed enough to be able to comment on what I've seen. That's hard. That's why I teach, that's why I write, that's why I care about research. ●

# Why Do People of Color Have to Go to Extremes to Save Their Kids?

Joseph Richardson, University of Maryland

October 21, 2021



Trained as a criminologist, Joseph Richardson has focused his career on documenting the lives of Black male survivors of violence. His multimedia project *Life After the Gunshot* gives voice to those who have experienced gun violence firsthand, telling harrowing stories of pain, suffering, and, sometimes, redemption. Richardson's research has helped to inform the creation of the Capital Region Violence Intervention Program, a hospital-based program that provides trauma-informed care to survivors of violent injury in an effort to prevent further victimization.

In this conversation, Richardson talks about the relationship between structural violence and interpersonal violence and his sense of what's currently happening on the streets.

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**Greg Berman: Can you rewind for me and tell me why you joined academia—and why you chose gun violence as an area of focus?**

Joseph Richardson: Man, this could be a long conversation, but I'll try to give you the Cliff Notes. Born and raised in a Philly, working-class neighborhood. I grew up in the crack era—I was an adolescent and saw the kind of devastation that it had on the city. My neighborhood was not immune to it. Even though it was a decent low- to working-class neighborhood, at least four guys that I grew up with died from gun violence.

I can remember the first person I knew who got shot. I didn't see it, but I saw the aftermath of it. I saw the way that he psychologically changed after he was shot. That always was disturbing to me. He was very well respected and then all of a sudden after he was shot, he became a zombie. He was doing a lot of drugs. He was eventually shot and killed on my block.

That was the beginning of my interest in gun violence. After graduating from the University of Virginia, I started graduate school at Rutgers. I started as a master's student. I had no interest in pursuing a doctorate. I didn't have enough money to complete the master's program. My dean

just placed me in the doctoral program as a way of finding money for me. I didn't know anyone who had a PhD. I didn't know anyone who was a professor. But that started me down the road.

### **What was your dissertation about?**

My dissertation adviser, Mercer Sullivan, had written a book, *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*. At the same time, he was also starting a project at the Vera Institute of Justice. He called me and said that he was leading an ethnographic research project on the social context of adolescent violence in New York City. It was a perfect match for me. He asked me if I was interested in helping him conduct his study, because there were three sites. One was Black, one Latino, and the other predominantly White. I said yes. I ended up at a school in Harlem, following twenty-five kids for three years. That was the time, in the late '90s, that the Bloods and Crips were emerging in Harlem.

All scientists should be engaged in applied research.  
Why do the work if it's not going to be translated  
into something?

I had twenty-five kids—ten were girls, fifteen were boys. Some were in gangs. Some were basketball players. Some were incredibly talented academically. I learned a hell of a lot about parenting. It started out as a study on the context of violence, but it became a study about social capital and how the utilization of it by kids either leads to violence, or desistance, or resistance.

After I wrote my dissertation and published a number of articles, I had a postdoc at the University of Chicago and then I started [my research] at the University of Maryland. The first study I conducted there was on kids who were adjudicated in adult court and detained in a D.C. jail. These were all kids who were like fifteen, sixteen years old, and they were serious violent youth offenders. I was working with kids who were arrested for murder, carjacking, attempted murder, robbery, et cetera. I did that for a year. It was really a study asking, "Why are we placing kids in adult jail?"

### **How did you get from there to the work you have done in hospitals?**

I was watching CNN one night. There was a segment on Soledad O'Brien's *Black in America* on a trauma surgeon in Baltimore whose name is Dr. Carnell Cooper. The segment was on how he

would operate on young men in Baltimore for gunshot wounds, and then he would see them a month later for similar gun-related injuries. He decided to create a hospital violence-intervention program. It was fascinating to me, so I cold-called him. When he answered I said, “I saw you on *Black in America*, and I was just wondering if I could meet with you?” He invited me up to his office. I remember that day, because the Discovery Channel was there. He was always on television. From that point on, he became my mentor.

I started learning the ropes of how hospital violence-interventional programs work. In the meantime, Dr. Cooper became the chief medical officer of Prince George’s Hospital Center [in Maryland]. They’d get like 745 victims of violent injury a year. Something like 40 percent of those are people from Washington D.C., because the hospital is close to the D.C. border. I asked him, “Dr. Cooper, do you think it would be okay if I use this trauma center as my lab to understand gun violence?” He said, “Sure.”

So I picked twenty-five young, Black men that were shot or stabbed and had come into that trauma center. I followed the lives of these guys for two years. I wanted that study to inform the development of a new hospital violence-intervention program. Dr. Cooper, who had already created one, was my counselor, giving me advice on how to go about developing one. He basically gave me full rein to develop it in the way that I saw fit. Ultimately, in 2017, I was one of the cofounders of a program at Prince George’s Hospital Center called the Capital Region Violence Intervention Program. I served as the codirector for two years.

### **What are some of the key lessons that you learned in implementing the program?**

A key moment for me was when I met one of the young guys that was in my study, Che Bull-ock, who was stabbed thirteen times. He and I developed a really close relationship. I could see that he really wanted to get out of the streets. When I started the violence intervention program in 2017, he was the first person I hired. I told him, “Listen, you’re going to be the guy that approaches all of the patients that have been violently injured bedside because you have the lived experience of the guys that are lying in that bed.” He accepted the challenge.

When we first started, people were asking, “Why did Dr. Richardson hire this guy? Why do you have this guy that’s been injured on staff? Why is he going into the rooms?” Eventually, they saw how successful my program was, and he became the model for violence intervention specialists. Every single program in Maryland hired one.

**One of the clear themes that come through your work is an effort to put forward the voices of young Black men. Why is that important to you?**

I give them credit for their resilience. They're constantly teaching me, and everyone else that hears their story, not just about the realities of violence in their neighborhoods, but also about the humanity that they have. I'm a researcher that does qualitative work. I want to amplify their voices. I really believe in community-based, participatory research. I was doing that before I knew that there was actually a name for it.

Scholarship should be informing policy or  
informing programming or changing the narrative  
with the public.

Che is a good example. He goes from being stabbed thirteen times in the street, to guest lecturing in my class, to becoming a violence intervention specialist for my program. Then we applied for a grant, and he becomes a co-investigator with me on the *Life After the Gunshot* project. That is the way that I choose to approach these issues—by having the people who are most impacted be involved in the work. They have the solutions to what we should do to address gun violence. Too often, we ignore their voices. In theory, we say that they should be involved, but we never really engage them in practice.

**One of the things that comes along with trying to elevate the voices of other people, in my experience, is that they are not just mouthpieces for our ideas. Sometimes they say things that we disagree with.**

Che and I have debates all the time, just the way I would engage in debates in the academic world. There have been plenty of times that I have had a blind spot that he, or another one of my young men, has checked me on.

I'll give you an example. When I was conducting my research with the young men that had been injured, I would bring them to my campus for the interviews. They would always ask me why the violence intervention program wasn't on my campus. Initially, I kind of blew it off. I didn't understand why they would want the program there. When I met Che, he came up to my office, like, three times a week. I knew, at a certain level, he probably was trying to get away

from his neighborhood and that a campus space was really peaceful. He brought it up to me. “Doc, why do you have a program at the hospital, because the program is kind of retraumatizing me because I was just stabbed and operated on there and almost died.”

I tried to explain this to the hospital administrators several times. I said, “We can start everything at the bedside, but the services can be provided off-site.” They weren’t interested in that model at all. I think it is because it is very sexy to have trauma surgeons involved at the hospital. People can buy into it. It’s got automatic credibility.

I mention this story because it gets back to your point about why it’s so important for those who are directly impacted to speak.

**I have seen you refer to yourself as a “scholar-activist.” I’m wondering whether you could spell out for me what that means and how you see that role.**

I don’t really like the term “activist.” I would call myself a scholar that engages in applied research. I would say that all scientists should be engaged in applied research. Why do the work if it’s not going to be translated into something? Translating a study into a hospital violence-intervention program is scholarly activism to me. Translating my research into a documentary that is accessible to the public—that’s scholarly activism to me. Engaging in policy discussions with elected officials, that’s what I really mean by scholarly activism. Scholarship should be informing policy or informing programming or changing the narrative with the public.

To me, that’s scholarly activism. Scholarly activism doesn’t necessarily mean I need to get out in front of a Black Lives Matter protest. I don’t really see myself in that lane. I think there are multiple lanes that people can assume.

**You write frequently about the idea of structural violence. Can you talk for a second about what you see as the relationship between structural violence and the kinds of interpersonal violence that result in trauma center visits?**

You can’t have a discussion about interpersonal violence without providing the context of structural violence first. Until recently, there was a long period of time when we were not discussing the ways that the structure has been violent. We need to move beyond the traditional framework. To use the title of Geoffrey Canada’s book, we need to move beyond *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* to see how systems have perpetrated harm against specific populations. For example, high

concentrations of poverty, food deserts, environmental racism, entire communities under some form of criminal justice supervision—all of these things are forms of structural violence which ultimately lead to a shorter life expectancy.

Then there are other parents, who don't have any of those resources, that are using the juvenile justice system to save their kids. They are saying, "I just want my kid locked up. At least I know where they are. They probably will have a higher survival rate if I go to the court and just tell the court, 'Can you take my kid?' I don't want my kid to die in the street."

In Washington, D.C., you have east of the river and then there's the rest of the city. As you move further into the northwest section of the city, it gets whiter and more affluent. If you go to Woodley Park, which is in the northwest section of the city, the life expectancy is 89.4 years. If you take a fifteen-minute drive east of the river, the life expectancy is 68.4 years. In just fifteen minutes, you lose twenty-one years of your life in the same city. That's insane. People need to understand that. That's not just in D.C. That's global.

**Do you think there's ever a tension between identifying these structural forces and the need to communicate to the men that you're working with that they have the agency to change their fate?**

It's interesting that I'm making the argument about structural forces, but if you were to ask the young men I work with why someone did not make it, they would place the responsibility in the hands of the person. For them, it would come down to accountability and personal responsibility. They would place the blame solely on the person and say, "That's the decision they made. They didn't have to make that decision, and they're responsible for it."

**I think that's an example of what I was trying to get at before when I said that sometimes when we listen to the voices of the impacted, they say things that don't conform with our ideology.**

Exactly. My ideology is that the structure is responsible, to a certain extent. But I think it's important to represent that the young men are holding themselves accountable for their actions. It's complex. Because sometimes they're actually discussing structural violence—they're just not using the term. In the *Life After the Gunshot* film, one of the guys says, "Look at where I live. It's fucked-up around here." There's a term for that. It's called structural violence. That's why I say it's a little bit more complex because they can hold themselves personally accountable, but also they're saying that the structures are problematic.

**In addition to writing about the people that are directly impacted by violence, you also have shined a spotlight on the caregivers that support them. For example, you've written about the use of exile as a parenting strategy. What do you mean by that?**

I don't think it's necessarily a new strategy in the Black community. We've seen for generations across the African diaspora, but particularly in this country, parents kind of sending their kids away.

Let's take two parents and they live in Harlem. Both of their kids are at that age where they are starting to get into trouble. Well, if you took the same family and they were White, and they were middle class, and their kids were involved in delinquency, there would be a ton of resources for that family. They might send their kids to camp. They might send their kids to counseling. They might find another school district to send their kids to—or a private school. But for many Black parents, the only alternative is, "I need to move my kid out of this situation."

**I don't think we've asked the hard questions about gun violence and COVID.**

For Black parents in New York City with some social capital, they might be able to tap into, for example, the Fresh Air Fund, where they can send their kid to live in Connecticut for a summer and they get to see a world outside of their block. But if you don't have that level of savvy in terms of social capital, they might send the kid to live with a brother in Texas.

Then there are other parents, who don't have any of those resources, that are using the juvenile justice system to save their kids. They are saying, "I just want my kid locked up. At least I know where they are. They probably will have a higher survival rate if I go to the court and just tell the court, 'Can you take my kid?' I don't want my kid to die in the street."



Why do parents have to do that? Why do people of color, particularly poor people of color, have to go to extremes to save their kids? It gets back to the issue of structural violence.

**Do you have a theory about why shootings are up over the past year?**

I think there are multiple reasons. Let's take Baltimore for example. Violence has been spiking in Baltimore since 2015. In my opinion, the fact that Baltimore has had over three hundred homicides since 2015 is directly correlated to Freddie Gray. The Baltimore police department may have been ahead of the rest of the nation in terms of police not responding to incidents of violence in the way that they may have in the past. I know cops who have told me this.

A few months ago, I had a long discussion with a cop who lives on my block in Philadelphia. I asked him why gun violence was increasing in Philly. His take, as an officer on the beat, was, "Look, I'm not jumping out of my car, I'm not doing any more pat-downs on the corner, if I know someone's going to throw a camera in my face." He told me that he used to tell kids out on the street, "Listen, you got thirty minutes to get off the corner. If I come back in thirty minutes and you're out here, whatever consequences happen, you know what it is." Now he's like, "I don't even tell the kid that. I just let him stay out there."

That's one perspective. I'm not saying that's the only perspective, but I'm giving you a perspective that I've heard both in Philadelphia and in Baltimore. One of my really close friends, who does hospital violence-intervention work, was telling me this story in Baltimore. He said that he saw two guys fighting. Clearly, it could've turned into a shooting. My friend goes around the corner and tells two cops sitting in their squad car. He says, "There are two guys around the corner that are fighting." And the cops looked at him like, "So?" He couldn't believe it.

**In recent months I've talked to a number of academics who are deeply skeptical that the police should play any role in responding to the uptick in shootings.**

[Those academics] are not on the ground. There's a thirty-thousand-foot perspective about that, and then there's the perspective of the people at ground level. I tend to lean more towards what the people who are experiencing the impact of the police pulling back are saying.

To be sure, there are other narratives that are going on in the street. One of my guys said to me, "There are no drugs out here." During COVID, it became harder to get drugs. The drug market was drying up in the city, which has an impact on people that were surviving by selling drugs.

That's squeezing more people out of the game. I'm giving you another perspective because that's a perspective that I've heard from the ground. I don't think anyone's talking about that.

I also think COVID has driven more people onto social media. You have a lot of beefs that are playing out on social media now. We can go back and forth on social media, and if I see you outside it becomes very real. And now it is totally legitimate for me to wear a mask and gloves in broad daylight.

**You've written in the past about the relative lack of funding for gun violence research. As you look to a future where maybe there will be more money for gun violence research, what questions should we be asking that we don't know the answers to?**

I would definitely say the question you just asked, because it's all really just speculation. I don't think we've asked the hard questions about gun violence and COVID.

**Last question. I couldn't help noticing that in various papers you have written, you have cited lyrics from Mobb Deep and Biggie Smalls. How has hip-hop informed your scholarship, if at all?**

In so many ways. I'm a child of hip-hop so it's important for me to always represent hip-hop culture in the work that I do. Like a lot of people who were raised in that era, hip-hop was a huge part of my identity. It helped me frame a lot of my thoughts about the world. From NWA saying "Fuck tha Police," to Public Enemy saying "Fight the Power," to Brand Nubian talking about the Five Percenters—all of those things were sources of knowledge to me. They were secondary teachers for me, whether good or bad. It's important to me to pay homage to that in my work. ●

## Violence Is Contagious

### Andrew Papachristos, Northwestern University



November 23, 2021

Employing both statistical models and qualitative methods, Northwestern University sociology professor Andrew Papachristos has documented that, within any given community, a relatively small number of individuals are involved in gun violence—and that these people tend to be connected to one another by a web of relationships.

Unlike many academics, Papachristos is committed to translating his research into policy and practice. To facilitate this, he recently helped launch the Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative, which seeks to leverage the university's expertise to address problems facing the residents of Chicago and surrounding communities.

In this conversation, Papachristos talks about his research into neighborhood violence and about the challenges faced by academics who choose to venture beyond the ivory tower.

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**Greg Berman: A lot of your work, some of which has been supported by The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation in the past, has been devoted to network science. I wonder if you might start by explaining what you mean when you use the expression “social network” and in particular what you have found about how homicides tend to cluster in a place like Chicago.**

Andrew Papachristos: When I talk about network science or social networks, what I'm actually talking about are the social relationships that link people, places, and institutions. There's a whole field that uses statistical models, as well as qualitative data, to understand how patterns of relationships affect what we do.

A lot of my work has applied this idea to understanding patterns of crime and violence, specifically gun violence. One of the most robust criminological findings is that delinquency and crime are group phenomena. The same is true of violence.

I started out looking at conflicts between groups and gangs and how stable these conflicts are. This was actually the original work that was supported by The Guggenheim Foundation. It was really looking at how these patterns endure. A lot of the murders that we see today, especially those that involve gangs or groups or crews, are actually determined long before any particular member even joins the group. These structures exist in unseen ways and they actually shape who your enemies are and who your allies are. And so I used network science to figure out if we can understand how these structures essentially inform or predict subsequent acts of violence.

We went from there to looking at individuals to see if we could figure out who's going to get shot as an individual, not just as a bucket of risk factors. Criminologists and sociologists know a lot about the risk factors associated with violence—being poor, being young, being Black or Latino, living in a particular neighborhood. But when you look on the ground on any given day, those risk factors only take you so far because everybody in a particular neighborhood has risk. So how do we figure out which one or two or three people are going to get shot?

Sometimes people are saying that they feel so unsafe that they have to protect themselves, even though they know carrying a gun is going to potentially get them in trouble, or get them killed. I do think people have agency, but I think those are forced choices in some ways.

So we went back to try to understand the shape of people's social networks, and their placement within them, and how that affected their probability of getting shot. The methods that we used borrowed from epidemiology, from the study of infectious disease. When you apply these ideas to violent behavior, homicide becomes an interaction.

We found that gun violence concentrates within social networks. So a small proportion of individuals are at the center of gun violence within any given community—and by small I mean a couple of hundred people in a community of tens of thousands. Exposure matters: when people around you are getting shot, your probability of being shot skyrockets. Violence is contagious in a very real sense—it cascades through networks in very predictable ways. It actually does spread like pathogens. There are others, but those are the key findings that we're seeing in multiple cities and that we're trying now to leverage for violence-prevention efforts.

**Not long ago, you gave a talk to a class at Princeton University that was entitled "Society Didn't Do It; Networks Did." I don't mean to put too much weight on a cheeky title that maybe you didn't even come up with, but it made me wonder how you think about individual agency when it comes to violence. I have always thought that there was an implicit moral argument in saying that violence is like a disease, since we tend not to hold individuals accountable for getting an infectious disease in the same way that we hold people accountable for shooting someone.**

I did not come up with that cheeky title, [Princeton sociology professor] Fred Wherry did. However, it's pretty apt for the type of work that I do. So just to be clear, I think that networks do it, but that society makes networks.

Let me explain with an analogy. I like to think about networks, especially networks of violence, like an interstate highway system. The system gets built over time, sometimes with good plans, sometimes with bad plans. It's built with certain purposes in mind: which places are you going to connect, are you going to destroy a given neighborhood to open up access, etc. And once that structure is in place, those massive, six-lane highways, it is really hard to create a whole new system. Once it's in place, that's what you use to get around. Sometimes you can make shortcuts or new pathways or whatever, but you can't really choose not to use the highway. When people are born, they inherit these systems. They don't always understand the history. They just know they need to get around.

And that's what happens with a lot of these networks where violence is concerned. They were built through patterns of housing segregation and school catchment zones and police districts and geographic political boundaries. It's not random. There's no randomness about why some neighborhoods don't have grocery stores or why some neighborhoods do have lead pipes and others don't.

When you think about neighborhoods that have high levels of gun violence and gangs or street crews, those networks help you get around. You need to know what the conflicts are, so you know how to be safe when you walk down the street, especially young people. So people navigate these networks and then they have to make decisions. If you feel unsafe, are you going to carry a gun to protect yourself? Are you going to call the police? Are you going to try to change networks?

I do think people make choices, but the choices are severely constrained. And sometimes the choices are not choices at all. Sometimes people are saying that they feel so unsafe that they have to protect themselves, even though they know carrying a gun is going to potentially get them in trouble, or get them killed. I do think people have agency, but I think those are forced choices in some ways.

**I've heard you say that the average age of a gunshot victim in Chicago is about twenty-seven years old. That seemed high to me.**

It surprised me the first time I saw it, but I've seen it consistently, which means it's real. And it's not just Chicago. In Evanston, the average age of gunshot victims is even older. What's important about understanding the age distribution is that what a twenty-seven-year-old needs is not what a sixteen-year-old needs, and vice versa. I think people tend to find a young person, a teenager, more sympathetic. A twenty-seven-year-old who might have a felony conviction is more likely to be portrayed as a gang member. When we talk about today's victims, it's crucial to understand who they are so that we can give them the resources that they need to thrive. If you want to save the lives of gunshot victims today, you have to think about young men who are in their late twenties, who don't have access to formal schooling systems, many of whom have their own children.

If the question is how do we stop gun violence today, the most important thing we need to do is build an infrastructure around the people who are doing neighborhood-level violence prevention.

**What are the implications for policy and practice if we were to recognize this reality—that many of the victims of gun violence are not-so-young men with criminal records?**

I worry about pitting short-term and long-term solutions against each other. I think when you're talking about on-the-ground violence prevention, that network thinking can help stop cascades of violence. I think you can use this information to reach people to intervene, to prevent violence, and to save lives. I think that's really important. But, going back to my highway analogy, if you don't fix the structural elements, it still means the next time an outbreak happens, it's going to be in the same place and affecting the same people.

Especially in the current political moment, we're often pitting the need to address structural problems against the need to intervene in the here-and-now. The truth is that we have to do both. I don't think we should ignore these large issues and how these systems were built. But to take those apart, whether it's to dismantle them or to build new systems, that work is going to take generations. We have to do this work, but at the same time we have to save lives today.

**I share your belief that we've been confronted with what feels like a false choice between engaging in interventions to stop the violence now versus longer-term investments that might alter the structures that you describe. I'm wondering whether there are one or two examples of investments, in either of these two categories, that you think we should be making?**

New York City is actually an example of a place that I think has done some things right. If the question is how do we stop gun violence today, the most important thing we need to do is build an infrastructure around the people who are doing neighborhood-level violence prevention. This means investing in the human capital and social capital of the people who are doing things like street outreach or violence interruption. How can we bolster them? What sorts of training do they need? We do a decent job of this when it comes to the police and EMT and firefighters. But our ability to support people doing neighborhood violence prevention tends to be limited and often supported mainly through philanthropic grants.

One of the things I'd like to see in almost every city is the development of a dedicated office for violence prevention—with somebody with real power overseeing a real budget—that can coordinate public safety efforts. These offices have to be properly staffed and resourced. You can't just build these things and set them up to fail. I think New York City has done a very good job on this with their Office of Violence Prevention. Los Angeles has too.

You can't just invest in street outreach but then not think about schools or housing. All of those things are intertwined. But you do have to start someplace. I think having a public entity with resources coordinating violence prevention is a massively important first step.

**You didn't mention policing. If the goal is to combat a serious spike in violence right now, is there no role for hot spot policing or focused deterrence to play?**

I think the research is pretty solid that policing can have an impact when it focuses on a small number of places and people and behaviors. And there are discrete models, like focused deterrence, that can be impactful when they are focused and not overreaching.

I think police have a nonzero role in this debate. When we're talking about gun violence, we know that they can have an impact. The other role for police, and this is crucial, is investigating. Most people can agree that we want police to investigate shootings and homicides and to solve cases. I think the problem is, as we see a surge in gun violence, people's gut reaction is to think we need more and more police. That's not what we want to do here.

**I want to turn to another cheeky title of yours that I liked, which was a piece you cowrote called “Why Do Criminals Obey the Law?” What did you learn from asking the question in that way?**

We asked the question that way in part because there's this idea that “offenders” are somehow different, right? We were combatting the old trope that criminals believe different things than noncriminals. We already knew that wasn't true, but what we wanted to look at was what happens if you ask them the same questions we ask the general population around things like trust in the police or belief in the law.

And so we sampled individuals who were arrested and convicted of a serious violent crime involving a firearm and we asked them, “What do you think of the law? What do you think of the police?” And what we found was that most of the individuals in our sample absolutely believed in the substance of the law. They know what's right, they know what's wrong. And they're in compliance with the law the vast majority of the time. Most people that get arrested are not spending their days figuring out ways to break the law.

Let's be clear: their opinions of the police and the criminal justice system are overwhelmingly negative, in part because of their treatment by the system, but there's variation. The people we surveyed could distinguish between the institution of policing versus what they had experienced personally.

**Another paper of yours was “More Coffee, Less Crime?”, which looked at the effects of gentrification on crime in both Black and White neighborhoods in Chicago. What did you find?**

We wrote that paper in the early 2000s, looking at how gentrification played out across neighborhoods. We used coffee shops as an indicator. The pattern was consistent: those sorts of resources emerge in White neighborhoods and not in Black neighborhoods. There's a corollary decrease in crime in White neighborhoods that gentrify.



Patterns of development that are often called “gentrification” are vastly different in Black and White neighborhoods. What research has shown since then is that it’s the Black middle class that gentrifies Black neighborhoods, not the sort of White hipster gentrifier stereotype. That’s another signal of the importance of race.

**A lot of your work is focused on Chicago. I’m interested to hear how you think about translating ideas from one place to another. How valuable is it to compare Chicago to New York when it comes to things like street violence?**

I should say, in addition to Chicago, we’ve done research in Newark, Boston, New York, Oakland, Stockton, New Orleans, Cincinnati, New Haven, and Hartford. We’ve looked at a dozen or so cities. The same three lessons—that gun violence is concentrated, that exposure matters, and that it is contagious—seem to be reproduced everywhere we look. However, network structure varies from city to city. Some cities, for example, have high-rise housing projects and some have lots of vacant, empty land. So the networks will look a little bit different, but people’s behavior within them often looks very similar.

**You’ve recently turned your attention to police misconduct. I’m wondering what you’ve learned about police violence by looking at it through the lens of network science?**

So it turns out police violence is a group behavior.

Every cop I’ve ever talked to tells me the same story about their first day on the job. They come from the academy, they’re all excited, and they are paired with some field training officer or veteran who tells them, “Hey, Rookie. I know you learned all this stuff in the academy, but let me show you what real policing is like.” And then they proceed to show them all the unwritten rules of policing, including how to get away with things. At a basic level, you learn from your peers as far as policing is concerned.

Our research has shown that a small number of cops are responsible for a large number of complaints. As with gun violence in the community, exposure matters: if you’re around other cops that are doing bad things, you’re more likely to do bad things. We are learning that whether you are part of the police department or a member of a street gang, deviance is a group phenomenon.

We’re really trying to unpack what that means because, theoretically, you have more control over policing than you do over an amorphous friendship group in a neighborhood. The police

department is a hierarchy where you can administer policy and potentially change behavior. We could today, if we wanted, say, “These are the officers that are at heightened risk of shooting a civilian.” But what would you do with that information? You can’t fire them just because they’re at risk. Having information and figuring out what to do about it are often very different things.

I think one of the things that's always hard with these kinds of programs is that you start with a small experiment to see if it works, but then when it is applied to the entire force, it's not clear that it has the same "oomph" like it once did. Scaling up is always a big problem.

**You did a piece of work looking at the impact of procedural justice training on police use of force. What did you find?**

I was not the lead author on that one, so I’m just going to speak at the broadest level. But what we found was that the procedural justice training as it was first implemented in Chicago was associated with reductions in levels of complaints and use-of-force complaints against those officers that were part of the program. It was not a massive impact, but it was not zero, either. Which does suggest that these trainings can potentially have a small-to-modest impact on outcomes like use of force.

I think one of the things that’s always hard with these kinds of programs is that you start with a small experiment to see if it works, but then when it is applied to the entire force, it’s not clear that it has the same “oomph” like it once did. Scaling up is always a big problem.

**I recently had a conversation with David Weisburd, who talked about the importance of criminologists “making the scene,” by which he meant getting out of the ivory tower and attempting to have some impact on the world of policy. You certainly have embodied this idea in your work in Chicago. I’m curious about what lessons you’ve learned from that experience.**

I could not agree with Weisburd more. I think that an engaged approach to research is crucial. We have to, in my opinion, shake up how we rank or value data. The gold standard is not a randomized control trial [RCT]. You can have an RCT and not make a causal claim. And you can make causal claims without having an RCT.

Let me give you an example of something we've learned, which you don't get from just looking at administrative data. We are currently working with about a dozen or so street outreach organizations in Chicago. Frontline workers are the ones doing the work, trying to mediate conflicts and engage people that are disengaged and disenfranchised.

What we're working on is the idea that it's not so much people that are risky, but situations that are risky. So risk is dynamic. Risk can change on a day-to-day, hour-by-hour basis. If all you're doing is looking at static data to assess risk, you're going to miss something.

So we're working with the frontline workers to learn from them about what kind of information they think is important. It's not something you could get by saying, "Well, can I add one more variable to the social learning theory in my statistical model?" I mean, I suppose that's interesting, but it's way less interesting than really trying to understand how to keep people alive.

I've found that every single time I've engaged with practitioners in this way that there's always a gazillion interesting theoretical things and theory-relevant things that can come out of it. But the more interesting questions are coming from the outreach workers in this case. And the only way you get at it is by engaging with them.

So we've codesigned interviews and we've built an entire survey instrument with our outreach partners. We sit down and analyze data side by side. They are able to provide insight into what our findings mean. And when they get interested in something, we go deeper.

I think it's important to recognize the power dynamic though. I mean, I'm a researcher at an elite institution and I'm working with nonprofit organizations that are struggling to keep the lights on. And so it's important to also understand the footprint of the criminologist in the field, especially as you're trying to answer questions that may impact funding.

## **Have you paid any professional price for your engagement in the “real world”?**

I’m fortunate enough where I’m at a stage in my career that it doesn’t impact me in the same way [it would] if I were a more junior scholar. I’m able to take risks.

I do get dragged into a lot of academic debates around the value of “observational data” and whether it is somehow lesser. I think there is an idea in our field that somehow observational data are bad. I think that’s harmful to science actually. It’s also harmful for the communities that are affected by gun violence.

Gun violence is not random, so why do we pretend like it is? Once you start to see these networks, you can’t unsee them. I can pretend like they don’t exist in a regression analysis, but I know they’re there. The people who are involved with gun violence, they know each other. They went to school together, they’ve got family relationships. So why are we pretending like they’re not? Can’t we amplify and boost that understanding? We think somehow our findings are lesser because there’s not a statistically significant star at the end of the equation. This bias towards certain types of causal logic stifles innovation.

And as far as public policy is concerned, the bar is set in such a way that most of the programs we evaluate will always fail. In Chicago, some of the programs we’re evaluating now are reaching a population that’s hard to serve, so they’re working with a few hundred people. Well, you are never going to get a statistically significant finding with those kinds of numbers. It’s not going to work because you don’t have fifteen hundred people in your sample. But how are you going to find a program that can service fifteen hundred people with the types of budgets they have? You’re not going to. I think those tensions really are stifling creativity and knowledge in this space. I think if more researchers got out there we could probably advance the field.

**Two of the things that I’ve heard from talking to other researchers about their engagement with the world outside of academia are a fear that their work might be misused and a concern that, when dealing with the media or with politicians, that they will have to sacrifice the nuance of their work. Have you had to confront either of those things?**

When it comes to the idea of your research being misused, I’m somebody who that’s happened to on multiple occasions. If you believe in open science, if you believe in sharing your ideas and your data, you’re always going to be open to being misused. The path I’ve taken is to push back

when this happens. I've written op-eds about the Chicago Police Department taking ideas of mine and incorporating them into projects in ways that I thought were horrific. I have also critiqued the Cure Violence model for doing the same thing. I'm not going to just shrug my shoulders and say, "Oh, there's nothing you can do about it." But at the same time, I think it's really vital that science get out there.

How do I explain statistical power to a city council member? Do they even care? The answer is that they don't care. What they care about is, "Does it work and can you prove it?" Do I need to be fighting with city council members about propensity score matching versus synthetic control groups? No, that's stupid. Don't do that. Let's have the nerd fight at the academic conferences, let's do it in journal spaces.

I think one has to be clear on what you think should be done, which is what I've tried to do. I think we should use network science stuff for on-the-ground violence prevention efforts, not for arrest-driven police behavior. That's an important distinction I'm consistent on.

The nuance question is really tough. I do not think we should abandon nuance. I think we need to train criminologists how to write better. I do believe it's crucial to produce a document that has all the nuance in it. But when you get in front of City Hall, when you get called to testify before such-and-such committee, when you're talking with a local nonprofit that wants to understand how this research will help them, you have to be able to say it in a couple of bullet points, and those bullet points have to be translatable to action.

I'll give an example. When we're talking about street outreach efforts in Chicago, there are some very clear findings: One, you can find the right people [who are engaged in violence]. Two, you can connect those people with services. And three, those individuals basically do better in terms of outcomes like reduced victimization and violent arrests. Everything I just said is true. Here's the nuance: it is not always statistically significant. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's not. How do I explain statistical power to a city council member? Do they even care? The answer is that they don't care. What they care about is, "Does it work and can you prove it?" Do I need to

be fighting with city council members about propensity score matching versus synthetic control groups? No, that's stupid. Don't do that. Let's have the nerd fight at the academic conferences, let's do it in journal spaces.

**Some academics don't seem willing to even entertain the idea that police could ever reduce crime. To me, it feels like they are starting from an ideological place and not looking at the evidence. Do you think that this is happening or am I misrepresenting what's going on in your field?**

The first thing I tell graduate students is, "You can't ask questions you don't want answers to." The questions you ask are going to put you on one side of something or other, and you better be prepared for the answers. More often than not, to go back to your nuance question, the answers are super complicated.

We are just wrapping up a project on neighborhood policing in Chicago, where we interviewed police officers, community residents, and community residents that were less engaged, ones who didn't show up to the meetings or weren't part of any particular organization. So we interviewed these groups of individuals every three to six months for two years before George Floyd was murdered and we're still interviewing them now. Even before 2020, what we were seeing was the variation and complexity of people's opinions about public safety and policing.

And it gets even more complicated in 2020. What we found is that both police and residents can differentiate between individual people and institutions. So I can like officer Greg, and still say the Chicago Police Department is a racist institution. I can say that I want to change the CPD, but don't take officer Greg away because he's the only one who gets me. In people's minds, that's not a conflict. They can hold those two thoughts in their mind at the same time. So, the on-the-ground view is really complex.

I think there's variation among academics. I think some academics are picking and choosing the questions they are asking based on where we are in terms of the current political moment. I don't think that's entirely bad. I do think that this is a long game, right? Crime and violence, policing and public safety, these are not new problems. So I think it's good to take up new perspectives and ask new questions from an academic perspective, but you have to be willing to understand the answers, even if it doesn't go the way you hoped it would go.

As an example, I would love to get up and say that street outreach is the most impactful thing we can do to reduce gun violence today, but I can't say that. I can say it's super promising. I can say that sometimes we see evidence that it works, but I can't say that this is the solution to gun violence. I can't say that, even though I personally really want to. But as a scientist, I can't say that. As a scientist, I have to say, "Here's what we know and here's what we don't know." ●

# **We Need to Value Black Lives in the Same Way That We Value Others**

**Kami Chavis, Wake Forest School of Law**



December 16, 2021

The director of the criminal justice program at Wake Forest University School of Law, Kami Chavis is a former federal prosecutor who has spent the bulk of her academic career focusing on issues of police accountability and racial justice.

In 2016, Chavis helped put together a report on engaging communities in reducing gun violence along with the Joyce Foundation, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and the Urban Institute. Among other things, the report documented that more Black Americans were concerned about gun violence than about police misconduct. In this interview, Chavis talks about what communities want and the relationship between police violence and the recent increase in shootings in many American cities.

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**Greg Berman: I wanted to start by asking you about your time as a prosecutor. How did that experience shape you?**

Kami Chavis: I was only a prosecutor for three years, but the experience definitely shaped my scholarship and teaching. It was one of the reasons I entered academia.

I did a lot of domestic violence, guns, and drug cases at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington, DC. I had a very busy caseload. It really put me face-to-face with how vulnerable some people and some communities are, not only to violence but also to the criminal justice system itself.

There were just so many disparities that I saw within our criminal justice system. As wonderful as our U.S. criminal justice system is, I just saw a lot of times where, quite frankly, it fell short. You would look at a person and see all the times that they had been arrested or convicted. Is the criminal justice system really the only response that we have for this individual's actions? I



guess I would say I saw the criminal justice system being overused.

[What] the George Floyd era . . . has done is really elucidated the need for local reform and how local communities really are going to drive this reform.

Before I became a prosecutor, I was certainly aware of the role that race has played since the inception of our country. We've always punished marginalized communities more harshly. So I can't say that what I saw when I was a prosecutor was a surprise, but I can say that it was very different being a part of that system. It was very weighty for me, the power that I had, even as a young, inexperienced prosecutor, really to change the trajectory of someone's life.

**You have said that we are in the midst of a criminal justice revolution in this country. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about how things are going?**

At the time that I wrote that, there had been a number of high-profile shootings of unarmed Black people—Michael Brown, Freddy Gray, Philando Castile, Keith Lamont Scott here in Charlotte. I can name others across the country.

This had been something that, of course, had been happening for decades. Black communities were very familiar with the tension that existed between police and their communities. But it seemed like the rest of America had awakened and recognized these problems. The body-camera footage and cell-phone footage corroborated what had been happening all along. So that was very powerful. And people were really spirited about the need for change and for reform.

You asked me whether I'm optimistic or pessimistic. I'll say that I am cautiously optimistic because I think what this era—the George Floyd era—has done is really elucidated the need for local reform and how local communities really are going to drive this reform. Certainly federal legislation is important. But in the wake of what happened to George Floyd, a lot of local communities enacted some really important changes, whether it was banning certain use-of-force tactics or requiring greater transparency, those kinds of things. These are small, incremental steps. We are still a long way from transformative reform in policing, which is really going to require us to think about our use of the criminal justice system to deal with so many social problems.

**Help me understand the scale of the problem. Some people say that we have an epidemic of police violence in this country. Others say that, if you actually look at the numbers, very few unarmed Black people are killed by the police each year. I'm curious to hear your sense of how big a problem we've got in this country.**

Oh, my gosh. I think we have a huge problem. I would say that if you have one unconstitutional violation, one preventable death, it's one too many.

**Do you think that we can realistically get to zero preventable deaths?**

I think we should try to get to zero but I don't think we'll get to zero, because I don't think that we will be able to enact the policies and cultural change to get there.

But to answer your question about the scope of the problem, it's not just about the number of people that are being killed. It's the number of people who are impacted at every point in our criminal justice system. Who do the police stop? Who do they search? Who do they decide to arrest? Who do the prosecutors decide to charge? How severe are those charges? What sentence do they receive? We see disparities in every single aspect of our criminal justice system. So, to me, it is endemic. And policing is the entry point for all of that.

I think that the scope of the problem really is understated. One reason I say that is because we really don't keep great statistics. For a long time, it was the *Guardian*, a British newspaper, that was one of the most reliable sources to figure out how many Americans had been shot by police. Thankfully, that's improved. There are now other groups that are keeping track of that.

But I think that we're still underestimating the disparities that happen all throughout the criminal justice system—and the effects that those disparities have on the legitimacy of our system. Black Americans and White Americans view our criminal justice system very differently. When you have that type of divide, it's ultimately going to impact the legitimacy of your entire system.

**Help me parse what role implicit bias plays in all of this. I've been to a number of implicit bias presentations and I generally have found them to be pretty persuasive. On the other hand, I have read that the implicit association test is useless and that there's no indication that implicit bias training makes a difference. So I'm kind of confused about how to think about implicit bias.**

I think implicit bias certainly plays a role in some of the disparities that we're seeing. But I also think we have explicit bias that we haven't really dealt with. Our case law really protects officers and other actors in the criminal justice system because the standards are so high for making an equal protection claim. You have to show intentional discrimination. Even if it exists, it can be very difficult to prove. Our laws and our standards also allow pretextual stops to occur. And so before we even get to implicit bias, I think that we have a problem with how we deal with explicit bias.

**You've called President Obama's task force on 21st-century policing a missed opportunity. Why was that?**

This was a national conversation that was taking place in the wake of a spate of shootings of unarmed African American men. There were so many experts convened, so much information. You had some of the greatest law-enforcement officials themselves who were involved in this, as well as renowned scholars.

I don't think it's just an issue of a few bad apples. What I think is that there's a lack of accountability for bad actors. We cannot overestimate the role that police culture plays in police misconduct. Even if you have one or two officers within a department that are causing the problem, they are part of an ecosystem. Their actions can really harm the entire department.

There's a lot of good information in that report. For example, they talked about technology in law enforcement and how we have to be careful about how those technologies might be used. They basically forewarned about some of the things that people are talking about today, in terms of gun-shot detection software and aerial surveillance and how that's deployed.

That document contains a wealth of ideas about how to improve policing. And they made some very good recommendations that we still haven't been able to codify. It would have been great to see a lot of local police departments adopt some of these principles internally.

**You mentioned that police were engaged in shaping the Obama reform agenda. Just to play devil's advocate for a second, if police are the problem, why do we need to engage them in the reform process?**

Oh, my goodness, that's just a basic principle of stakeholder participation. If you have top-down policies and you want to implement them without the input and advice and expertise of the people that are very close to the problem, you're not going to get great solutions. And not only are you not going to get workable solutions, you're also not going to get the buy-in that you need to sustain any reform that you put into place.

We say that police are the problem. Actually, I don't think it's all police that are the problem. I think that a fraction of police officers engage in these negative behaviors. There are a number of police officers and police executives around the country who also think that our system needs to change. I think if you were to ask any number of police officers, they would tell you that their role has expanded unreasonably and what they are tasked with doing on a day-to-day basis has an impact on their morale, their mental health, their ability to do their jobs effectively. And so I think that we do have to involve law enforcement in the conversation about reform.

**I recently talked to Andrew Papachristos from Northwestern, who has done research that echoes what you just said, which is that when you're talking about the worst kinds of police misbehavior, you really are talking about a handful of officers in any given department. But of course many progressive reformers reject talk of "bad apples" because they think this obscures the need for structural change.**

I want to make a distinction. I don't think it's just an issue of a few bad apples. What I think is that there's a lack of accountability for bad actors. We cannot overestimate the role that police culture plays in police misconduct. Even if you have one or two officers within a department that are causing the problem, they are part of an ecosystem. Their actions can really harm the entire department.

How do we deal with these officers? In my opinion, I don't think you can train away bias. We have to figure out a way to get rid of people who have shown a propensity for violence. When we keep officers in the ranks that are doing these things, that's very problematic.

**President Biden comes to you and asks you to lead an updated version of the Obama task force on policing. If the goal is to change the culture of police, what's your best guess on where we should be focusing our energies at this point?**

I don't think that there's just one thing. I've always said that there's a wide array of tools available to solve this problem. It's not going to be one single thing. I think the first thing we need to do is to rethink the role of police in society. I don't think we need police officers to engage in all of the roles that we're currently asking them to engage in. Do we need an armed first responder for every police call? We don't.

So I think the first thing we have to do is to rethink the role. And then I think that we have to have clear policies and procedures that elevate human life over some of these small criminal violations. Nobody should ever need to break down the door of someone's home in the middle of the night just to serve a drug warrant. We have to weigh the value of human life against the value of a few grams of cocaine. That happened here in North Carolina in Elizabeth City. Seven armed sheriff's deputies came to execute a warrant for something like three grams of cocaine. The guy's dead now. Why are we doing this? It doesn't make sense to me.

We know that police officers can show great restraint. We saw that on January 6. No matter what you think about that event, I know I saw lots of people disobeying law-enforcement orders and breaking down barricades and entering and trespassing into a building, and we did not have mass casualties. So that shows me that police can exercise restraint. It's just they choose not to in certain circumstances. We need to value Black lives in the same way that we value others.

**Do you think there's a link between the kinds of police violence that we've been talking about and the gun violence that we see in the streets of American cities?**

I think that they're both very complex problems with long histories. But I do think that there is a connection that we need to explore if we're going to address either of them effectively. The first thing to say is that the gun culture in our country endangers everyone. Police officers don't know who's armed and who is not. So that plays a role.

When you have the type of police misconduct that we've seen, it delegitimizes our entire criminal justice system. And so you won't have the community partners that you need in order to prevent

and address the violence that's happening. People don't necessarily want to turn someone in or to help in an investigation. There are instances where people have tried to be helpful, and then they themselves have been arrested or made a suspect. And so there are legitimate fears in some communities.

If there's massive distrust, you're not going to have the partnerships and collaboration that you need to address these other underlying issues. And it can actually exacerbate problems because perpetrators can move about freely without fear that someone in the community is going to cooperate with police in an investigation against them.

I also worry about what happens when an officer goes into an area that's been identified as a hot spot. You're going to go into that area with a different mindset than you would in another area. You're automatically going to put on your warrior hat rather than your guardian hat.

**When I spoke with David Weisburd, he talked about how crime tends to cluster in a handful of locations within a neighborhood. We also know that crime tends to cluster among a discrete handful of people. I'm wondering how you think about hot spot policing and efforts to target individuals who are at high risk of committing violence. Do you have any concerns that these kinds of strategies might exacerbate racial disparities?**

I think that it is true that when we look at what we would call a high-crime area, usually you can identify the drivers of that crime. You don't have a community of people who are all engaging in criminal behavior. It's usually a small number of people who are having a really big effect.

But we have to be very careful with hot spot policing or predictive policing because one thing that we know is that a lot of the algorithms used to determine whether an area is high-crime or not—the underlying data is biased because communities aren't policed in the same way. We know that there's an overenforcement of certain crimes in certain areas. We know that Whites and Blacks use drugs in the same proportion. But there's a disparity when you look at the people who have criminal convictions for possession and things like that. People in marginalized communities are having disparate outcomes. So my point is that when it comes to hot

spot policing, you're using data that could be potentially biased. If we're talking about predictive policing, we know that these algorithms are proprietary so we don't even know how they are making this determination.

I also worry about what happens when an officer goes into an area that's been identified as a hot spot. You're going to go into that area with a different mindset than you would in another area. You're automatically going to put on your warrior hat rather than your guardian hat. Is everyone you see a potential threat to you? I worry about that and the implications that it could have.

**In 2016, you played a role in putting together a report on engaging communities in reducing gun violence along with the Joyce Foundation, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and the Urban Institute. That report included a survey. Half of Black respondents ranked police misconduct as an extremely serious problem, whereas 80 percent ranked gun violence that way. How do you read those results looking backward? Do you think we'd get the same results if that survey were done again today?**

I don't know. I can't really speculate. We often try to be dichotomous about these issues. I've always said that respecting the civil rights of people is not mutually exclusive to effective law enforcement. I think you can have both. You can investigate and prevent crimes and you can do so constitutionally. And it really is disappointing to constantly hear it framed in this dichotomous manner. If you critique the police, then you're antipolice. If you don't believe in defund the police, or if you want to address gun violence, then you are pro-police.

I think the survey results indicate that communities are concerned about violence in their streets, but they are also concerned about the way in which they are policed. The thing that we learned from that survey is that people didn't necessarily not want police. They want police to really focus on community priorities. They want police to focus on violent crime. Our communities are not simplistic or monolithic. How I read those surveys is that both police misconduct and gun violence are important issues to address. ●

## You Have to Crack Down on Gun Offenders

### Peter Moskos, John Jay College of Criminal Justice



January 20, 2022

John Jay College professor Peter Moskos embodies what David Weisburd was talking about when he encouraged academic researchers to “make the scene.” In addition to being a Harvard-trained sociologist, Moskos spent more than a year working as a police officer in Baltimore, Maryland. That experience served as the basis for his first book, *Cop in the Hood*, which offers a first-person perspective on the challenges of street-level law enforcement.

Picking up on a theme that was articulated by Richard Aborn, in this interview Moskos makes the case that New York City has gotten away from the approach to public safety that for a generation succeeded in reducing both crime and the use of jail. He argues that the key to addressing the recent spike in violence is to aggressively prosecute gun offenders.

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**Greg Berman: Your father, Charles Moskos, was a sociologist who devoted his career to studying the military. Is it just a coincidence that you are a sociologist who spends a lot of time looking at paramilitary organizations?**

Peter Moskos: I’m an apple that did not fall far from the tree. My brother’s a businessman in Holland, so he did not take that path. But both my dad and my mom, who’s still alive, were both thinkers so we had lots of intellectual conversations around the dinner table. I thought that everyone did, but when people would come over they would say, “No, this is a little bit odd.” I grew up in an intellectually rigorous household, but I was never pressured to follow in his footsteps. But I did. I went to the same college, and I’m in a field that’s shockingly similar to his.

I think part of it was I saw that my parents were both teachers—my mom was a high school teacher—and we had a pretty good life. Certainly, I don’t think I’d be where I am now if it weren’t for them.



**Your first book, *Cop in the Hood*, was about the time you spent working as a police officer in Baltimore. I'm interested in experiential learning versus book learning. How did your experience of being immersed in practice compare to your graduate studies?**

It was very different.

When I started grad school in '95, I went to study something urban-related because I've always been a city boy. That was when murders were plummeting in New York. And when I read some of the literature, all the experts said it couldn't happen. Not unless we fixed the root causes and changed society. That was the traditional sociological argument. I thought they were wrong on some fundamental level. It seemed obvious that the data didn't fit the theory. I thought to myself that sociology is probably a good field to get into if all the leading experts are basically wrong about it.

In a graduate class, I read John Van Maanen's "Observations on the Making of Policemen," which is a great ethnographic work on the Seattle Police Department in the late '60s. My original plan was just to replicate his study and look at socialization in the police academy. I set out to try to get access for that. It wasn't easy. Police departments don't want researchers. Certainly, they didn't back then.

Most researchers aren't part of the group they study, and, of course, there are issues about bias and objectivity. But absolutely the things I learned as a cop I could not have learned just as an observer.

But Baltimore said I could do it there. And when I got there, the politics had changed and there was a new commissioner. They said, "You can't do it." I said, "If I go back to Harvard, I don't have a place to live." And that's when they said, "Well, why don't you become a cop for real?" So that's what I did. I went through the process and got hired. I told them that I was going to quit after a year and write a book about it. My advisor at Harvard was not pleased with this plan, but in the end, it all worked out.

### **Why was your advisor opposed to it?**

I think he thought I'd pulled a bait-and-switch on him, because it wasn't my original plan. Some of it might have been just pure class snobbery. Eventually it got smoothed over and ultimately he was supportive. But there were a rough couple of months there where I was having problems on both sides.

But I'm lucky. I think I could have gotten a dissertation out of my original research plan, but it wouldn't have been anything more than that. The academy is not where the real story is. Ultimately, it is about being a cop on the street. Where I was assigned was a pretty good place to learn if you're going to be a cop for a short period of time. Most researchers aren't part of the group they study, and, of course, there are issues about bias and objectivity. But absolutely the things I learned as a cop I could not have learned just as an observer. And certainly as an observer, you wouldn't have that access. And that experience in Baltimore has given me access to cops ever since. I can talk to cops because I walked a mile in their shoes.

**Before we get into what's gone wrong in New York and other cities of late, I want to spend a minute talking about what went right previously. When I talk to my kids about criminal justice in New York, I tell them that, up until very recently, basically every indicator that we care about was pointed in the right direction—crime was down, jail was down, complaints against the police were down, use of force was down, etc. They are shocked, because the only things they have heard about the criminal justice system are negative. What's your answer to what New York City got right prior to the past two years?**

Well, that's what I'm working on right now. My next book is going to be an oral history of the crime drop in the '90s. I think the fundamental thing that went right was when William Bratton became [New York City police] commissioner for the first time, he said, "We're going to reduce crime, fear of crime, and disorder." He got the police back in the crime-prevention game. That was really revolutionary. If you go back to the Kerner Commission [convened by President Johnson to study U.S. civil unrest in the 1960s], they articulated what became the sociological party line about crime: that we have to fix society to address crime and that police don't play a large role in that. In fact, they blamed police for a lot of the riots that happened. And that was just accepted by everyone.

In New York City before Bratton, if you made arrests in 30 percent of the serious crimes, you were doing okay. As long as there was no scandal, you were fine. It was very much an anticorruption-obsessed department post-Serpico and the Knapp commission. That was business as usual. There just wasn't any drive to do better.

Bratton effectively said, "To Hell with that." The idea of going back to the crime-prevention game was the major switch. It was essential that he said, "This is our job." I think a big part of what has been lost over the last year or so is that police departments suddenly said, "Okay, we won't be in the crime game again. If you're worried about police use of force, we can focus on that and disengage."

[The crime-tracking tool] CompStat gets a lot of credit, but at some level, it's just a crime map. But it was an accountability tool and that was the key. It was about saying to precinct commanders, "This is your job and you have to know what's going on." The results were shockingly quick.

Violence in New York didn't start to go down in 1995 because lead was removed in 1980. All those macro things, I'm not saying they don't matter, but they don't matter so much in New York City. It was so basic, this idea that the police should care about crime. Other departments quickly followed suit. It was basically saying, "This is our job again." And we're still going to worry about corruption, but we're not going to be obsessed by it. And of course there are tons of little details, like the broken windows approach of saying we are going to focus on public order.

**I want to return to broken windows in a minute, but first I wanted to ask you how much credence you give to Patrick Sharkey's argument that some percentage of the crime decline in New York City was due to the existence of community groups, business improvement districts, and other nongovernmental organizations?**

That's part of the story, certainly. I don't focus on it because I'm focused on policing. But my book actually starts with three stories that don't get enough attention, that really have very little to do with policing. Bryant Square Park reopened in 1990. The Times Square business improvement district remade Times Square. And the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey started cleaning up the bus terminal. The courts in New York ruled that the Port Authority

and the subway system could make and enforce rules. They said that begging on the train wasn't a constitutional right. It couldn't have been done without that course correction. All this happened before the crime drop and, in a way, set the stage for it.

To say it's bail reform's fault that shootings have gone up is not accurate. But people are using bail reform as a proxy for the whole movement in general. In that sense, I think it's a fair criticism.

Another important milestone was getting graffiti off the subways in the '80s. This was significant because it was the first victory against disorder that the city had seen in literally decades. This problem that was supposedly insurmountable was fixed. The idea that we can actually make a difference here was, I think, an important philosophical foundation for what happened in policing.

But the actual major decline in violence was primarily, I think, a focus on gun offenders and on public order. The police got back in the crime-prevention game. But I don't want to dismiss these other things. New York was also in a good position. Compared to other cities, we had money. We also have a rich tapestry of treatment and alternative-to-incarceration programs. They're all little pieces in the jigsaw puzzle. Collectively, I have to assume it makes a difference.

**Let's talk about broken windows. In other forums, you have said that broken windows policing has basically ended in New York City. I'm wondering what your reaction is to those who argue, "Well, that's a good thing because it lightens the touch of the system, particularly on overpoliced populations like young Black men"?**

I would say: ask people in those neighborhoods what they want. There's a great strain of paternalism out there. People are telling other people how their neighborhoods should be policed.

Broken windows is not the cause of mass incarceration. It's about changing behavior. When broken windows was first implemented, it was part of a community policing strategy. Bratton certainly saw it as community policing. It was part of the police asking the community what they wanted us to do. It was a bottom-up approach.

[Co-author of the broken windows concept] George Kelling, before he died, said maybe broken windows was a bad metaphor in hindsight, because he never expected the phrase to take off like it did. And he certainly saw problems in the way it was interpreted. But Kelling and Bratton were close until the end. Bratton really did fundamentally change the police department culture. And broken windows was a part of that.

But the problem is that after Bratton left, some things went off the rails. I'm pretty sure that stop, question, and frisk would not have taken over the police department in the late 2000's had Bratton still been commissioner. That's what a lot of people say and I believe that. Bratton was very much against zero-tolerance policing. Those two concepts have gotten linked by opponents, but they're fundamentally at odds.

In terms of broken windows, I think the label has become toxic, but you could come up with a new name and do the same concepts again. Because we are having the same problems again.

**I know that you haven't done an empirical study, but what's your sense of whether bail reform actually has had an impact on the streets of New York?**

The idea that it has no impact is crazy. When people don't get detained, some of them commit crimes. I don't think it's a huge number, but it's not zero.

But bail reform is being used as a crude weapon to say, "Something's going wrong, let's blame bail reform." Bail reform is a multifaceted thing and much of it is good. But, as I've said on Twitter recently, the absurd parts are so absurd. You could just fix it. You could allow judges to consider public dangerousness. You could fix the witness disclosure part of it. There are a few things that would be so easy to fix, and you could have the rest of it. But the politicians and activists who are rooted in the police and prison abolition philosophy don't want to fix it. So to say it's bail reform's fault that shootings have gone up is not accurate. But people are using bail reform as a proxy for the whole movement in general. In that sense, I think it's a fair criticism.

**Speaking of the movement, on Twitter you have written, "Prominent police reformers don't want better policing, they want less policing and abolition. Reform is too often a disingenuous tool masking a misguided, dangerous, and unpopular goal." Do you think that anything good has come out of the Black Lives Matter protests?**

My first thought is no, but that's not entirely true. Police do need accountability. And they're not inclined to be self-reflective on that matter. Part of the reason I think New York is better in policing than other cities is because there has been accountability. Al Sharpton is a divisive figure in policing circles, but he and others did hold the NYPD's feet to the fire. And the NYPD is better because of that. They don't get away with things other departments do. Police should be under pressure. Police need critics. In that sense, it's good.

**How do you respond to the argument that American policing is rotten to its core, that it has its roots in slave patrols and that it is essentially a mechanism for oppressing Black people and always has been?**

Well, it's historically just inaccurate. I think it's an important issue. It's not just an academic debate, because this claim does lay the groundwork for everything that follows. If it were true that policing was a legacy of slavery, then yeah, you'd want to get rid of it. I think there's a parallel to the 1619 controversy. Is American policing a bad concept that we're doing our best with, or is it a good concept with flaws?

There's no mystery how police in the North were established. And even in the South, before it came crashing down with the end of Reconstruction, the police were set up by an occupying army imposing a northern way. And it failed, unfortunately.

Look, it was a weird year and there was COVID, but the evidence that [the increased violence] was policing-related is pretty strong. Police got out of the crime-prevention game. There was a push and a pull that led to less policing.

It is true that, wherever they are, policing reflects American society and American society has often been quite ugly. Police are a part of city politics, and that was a pretty flawed institution when we're talking about the late 1800s.

I recently looked at Frederick Douglass's newspaper in Rochester, New York, because he was writing when police were established in Rochester. If it were really a White supremacist concept, you'd think he might have said something about it. But it just wasn't on their radar.

Look, at a functional level, policing fills a need. That's why abolishing policing will never work. Someone's going to fill that vacuum. I'd much prefer to have it done by public employees who have to abide by the Constitution as opposed to private security guards and gangs. These experiments in Seattle or Minneapolis where you have police-free zones, they all come crashing down. We're not ready for that yet.

**Do you think that the police in New York have a legitimacy problem?**

Legitimacy is a relatively new concept. Legitimacy is important for any organization, especially policing. But the same people that raise the issue of legitimacy are the ones actively working to undermine police legitimacy. The same people who are saying that police need to be more legitimate are also saying that they're slave catchers. Well, you can't be legitimate if you're a slave catcher. So I find that argument disingenuous.

I think legitimacy is an outcome of good policing, broadly defined. Policing has legitimacy when it's effective. That's how police gain legitimacy primarily. Legitimacy is more of an effect than a cause, I think. Some people are never going to like cops for ideological reasons. And I don't see any efforts to increase the legitimacy that actually do increase it.

**There are reports that clearance rates are down in New York City. Do you think that is unrelated to people's perception of police?**

I don't think the public really cares or knows about the clearance rate.

**That's probably true, but I'm asking if the clearance rates have gone down because people are less willing to participate in investigations.**

I think there's a link to bail reform. I talked to a reporter the other day who said that she is hearing people in the streets say that they're not willing to be witnesses because they can't remain confidential. That hasn't gotten any attention yet. That does a lot to decrease the legitimacy of the system.

I also think that there's more crime and that does lower clearance rates. When shootings double, you can be certain clearance rates are going to go down because suddenly there are twice as many cases. It's not like they have twice as many detectives to resolve these things.

Look, it's not like people were talking to the cops ever. I mean, the very first shooting I handled, the victim wouldn't tell me his name. The idea that you don't talk to cops, it's been around forever. It's very hard to convict someone if you don't have someone who's willing to testify. I'm inclined to believe it's gotten a bit worse recently, but we don't actually have data on that. And then the question is: why has it gotten worse? Well, if a guy's got a gun and he's not detained and he's back on the street, then I think it's understandable that people don't want to tell the cops. The fact that the system isn't working like it used to has an impact.

**Tell me about your Violence Reduction Project, in which you invite a variety of people to explain how they would reduce violence. Are there good ideas out there that you've been unearthing beyond Cure Violence and focused deterrence?**

When shootings started to rise in 2020, you had respected academics saying, "Violence can't be up this much." And then you had people saying, "Well, it was worse in 1990." What a stupid debate to be having. I don't care that it was worse in 1990. It just doubled now. More people are getting shot every week. This is real. And then, very quickly, you started to hear the same arguments that you heard in previous decades: "We have to fix society."

Just hearing gunshots outside your house is traumatic. Most privileged people have no connection to that level of violence. And I think that's part of the problem. It needs to be a higher priority.

Look, it was a weird year and there was COVID, but the evidence that [the increased violence] was policing-related is pretty strong. Police got out of the crime-prevention game. There was a push and a pull that led to less policing. Some of it was changing laws and decriminalization and legalization and nonprosecution. And some of it was police saying, "Well, screw it." Cops are upfront about this. They're like, "Yeah, if I see someone with a gun, I'll still go after them. But if I see someone suspicious in an alley, I'll just drive on. Because if I stop him, what if a crowd gathers and he resists and I have to use force and suddenly..." The bottom line is there was less policing and that correlates perfectly with violence in a way that COVID or the economy doesn't.

So I said to myself, well, maybe I should figure out what can be done. So I put that website together. The only condition for contributors to the violence reduction project is: I don't want



long-term solutions. It's got to be short- or medium-term. And it has to be somewhat feasible, politically. Give me your solution.

**Do you have a favorite among the contributions?**

They're all my babies, but I think gun prosecution is key. It was key in the '90s and it's key now. You have to crack down on gun offenders. That's probably the single most effective thing that can happen. But that's more of a prosecutorial thing than a police thing, because cops are arresting the gun offenders, at least in New York.

But part of me doesn't want to have a favorite because I think you do have to do everything. I want effective violence interrupters, though I do think it's vastly overblown. I don't think any of it will work without police. For these programs to work, you need a certain level of public safety. You're not going to improve society if people are getting shot every day on your block, or you hear gunshots. For people to say that things were worse in 1990, I don't think they understand the trauma of gun violence. It really should dominate everything.

**I think, in particular, people don't understand the ripple effects of shootings.**

Just hearing gunshots outside your house is traumatic. Most privileged people have no connection to that level of violence. And I think that's part of the problem. It needs to be a higher priority. In terms of absolute death, it's actually about twenty thousand a year, which is less than a lot of things. But the trauma is so much greater. People sometimes say, "Well, someone was shot, but they will recover." No, you don't. You don't recover from a gunshot wound, really, ever.

**How hopeful are you about New York City Mayor Eric Adams and the new administration?**

Adams wasn't my first choice, but I've liked everything he's said and done since the primary. And it's interesting that he basically won all of Black and Brown New York while the progressives all voted for Maya Wiley and all the *New York Times* readers voted for Kathryn Garcia.

A lot of New York still speaks with a New York accent. I think it's important that Eric Adams feels that that's his base. And he made crime an issue. No one else was talking about crime before he did. As I said before, before you can solve the problem, first you have to say, we're going to care about this. So I think Adams is passing that first test. The devil is in all the details, but I do have an atypical feeling of optimism right now.

**Do you think Adams will close Rikers Island?**

Rikers is a frustrating issue. Who would have thought that the plan to close it was going to get outflanked from the left? Rikers is horrible. But I think the left may have effectively killed the idea of building new jails. At some point, there are going to have to be jail beds for people, whether they're on Rikers or somewhere else. The idea that we're going to achieve prison abolition simply by closing prisons . . . it's not going to happen. I fear it's going to backfire. I don't want a right-wing overreaction.

**From the outside looking in, it seems like the intellectual climate in the academy is bad right now and that things have become very politicized. Do you think this is a fair assessment? And have you paid any professional price when you have departed from the social justice orthodoxy of the moment?**

I don't think so. I'm always afraid it'll happen. I think it helps that I'm in a nontraditional department in terms of my academic field. I think it also helps that I'm not a right-winger, though certainly I know many people think I am.

Academics are a weird breed. It's amazing how afraid academics are. My own theory is that the PhD weeds out people who don't comply. In my mind, the press is a bigger issue. I hear from respected older journalists a lot and they're afraid. They're afraid of the newsroom. That's troublesome, that idea that objectivity is somehow bad.

I do find in general that the left is far less willing to engage. I don't get invited to those panels. They don't want to hear dissenting views, and I think that's worrisome. There is an attack on the traditional model of free speech that I think is probably the single most dangerous part of the movement. But hopefully the pendulum will swing back. ●

## **There Are Clearly Spaces Where Law Enforcement Does Not Belong**

**Tracie Keese, Center for Policing Equity**

February 17, 2022



Tracie Keese was the first African American commander in the Denver Police Department. She also served as the first-ever deputy commissioner for equity and inclusion in the New York City Police Department. All told, Keese has spent more than three decades thinking about police-community relations, including helping to create the Center for Policing Equity, an organization dedicated to reducing racial disparities and promoting cultural change within American police departments.

In this conversation about race and policing, Keese expresses a desire for new, community-driven responses to crime that will shrink the role of policing—and a concern that the recent surge in violence might have exactly the opposite effect.

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**Greg Berman: I'm curious to hear how the past couple of years have felt for you given the various cross-cutting identities that you inhabit—former police official, Black woman, reformer, grandmother, etc. What has it been like to walk in your shoes over the past twelve to twenty-four months?**

Tracie Keese: I would tell you that the number one thing that always comes out of my mouth is that it continues to be exhausting. For most of us who are in these intersections, it has been increasingly heavy over the last two years.

There is a lot of eagerness right now to understand how race is showing up and implicating criminal justice and law enforcement. But this work is hard. You have to be able to understand the different perspectives and try to help folks think through ways that we can move forward. I am a part of a broader community that has historically experienced injustice. There are millions of people across this country who look like me and carry this burden of Blackness. It is both a joy and a burden. And it is weighing on me in ways that only Black police officers, and Black female police officers, would understand.

And then when you compound it with this pandemic that no one saw coming and that a lot of folks were not ready for . . . it makes you reevaluate what you believe about yourself and what you believe about others. So it's been heavy. It's exhausting and it's tiring. You can burn out quickly if you don't do self-care.

**Rewind for me: Why did you join the police force to begin with?**

That was thirty-something years ago. I was looking for a job with benefits. I was a single parent at the time, and I needed to find something that provided a bit of stability and medical insurance. I come from a family of uniformed folks, but not in the policing realm. A military family. And my mother was a nurse. So we always have had this ethic of service that you should be doing something.

When I sat down to take the police test, I was twenty-five and I needed a job. I was born and raised in Denver. I applied to three places actually—Denver, Houston, and Colorado Springs. This would've been in 1989. My mother narrowed my options down really quickly saying, "One, you're not moving to Houston, and two, you're not moving to Colorado Springs." Luckily enough, I got the call from Denver. And so that started my career.

I had an opportunity to serve my community and I did. I am one of the lucky ones, in that I was the commander of the district where I grew up. That was a big honor. But it also meant that a thousand eyes were on me, including my parents.

**How do you think being a part of the police department changed you as a person?**

It changed me in profound ways. It provided me with a huge learning opportunity, sort of a lab to do different things, to think about what's happening and what are the determinants of crime. If it were not for the Denver PD, I would not be the person I am. I also would not have been prepared to go somewhere else and begin to try to have these conversations in a different way. So I honor my experience, because it has shaped me.

When you look back on your career, you can see that you've grown in many different ways. I was able to meet just incredible people. But I was also exposed to the other side of things, people who were just downright nasty, racist, and misogynistic, where you wonder how some of these people can get into the uniform.

But, as I tell a lot of folks, I'm grateful for my career. I had somebody ask me if I would do it again. And I said, of course I would. I absolutely would. For me, the experience was definitely on the joyous side and the plus side. It was a pleasure. I enjoyed it.

Whenever we have tragic events, the first thing that comes out of everyone's mouth is, "Well, they should do more training." And that is not always going to be the appropriate answer. . . . But one of the things that we still have not gotten really good at is doing long-term evaluations to see how people use their training.

**How would you compare and contrast your experience in the Denver PD to the NYPD? Denver isn't exactly a small town, but I would imagine that the NYPD is a whole different kind of ecosystem to operate within.**

When you talk about the fundamentals, all departments have a lot in common. What is different is the culture within each department. The thing that struck me about NYPD is that it is very, very rich in tradition. There is a tremendous amount of reverence for that tradition. I learned that NYPD is a really large family. Of course, as with many families, there are dysfunctional uncles. But there are also people within the NYPD who are doing beautiful things in the community, trying very hard to provide safety.

You have to recognize the scale of the NYPD. When you are that size, you have to have processes and systems. In smaller agencies, you can do pilots much quicker. In very large organizations, it is hard for a commissioner to push change all the way down to the precinct level. There are exceptions to the rule, but most commissioners and chiefs only last four years on average. You can only get so much done in four years. And so that means that you have to prioritize. When you have commissioners that only last three or four years, the community's expectations have to be managed about how much movement and change you can really make in four years.

I would say you get resistance to change no matter where you are because we're cops, and we don't want to change, period. I think in your larger organizations, it is a bigger challenge

because you have folks who either don't want to know or who are confused about what you're asking them to do.

**When you were at the NYPD, you oversaw the department's training program. I was wondering whether you could help me make sense of how to think about the potential impacts of training. Obviously, we should be training officers for the roles we want them to play and the values we want them to embody. But a lot of the research I have been reading recently about implicit-bias training and antiracist training induces skepticism about how effective it is in actually changing people's behavior. So I guess my question to you is this: what should we reasonably expect of police training?**

It's a good question. Whenever we have tragic events, the first thing that comes out of everyone's mouth is, "Well, they should do more training." And that is not always going to be the appropriate answer.

One application of training is not going to give you the outcomes that I think people are looking for. Training for police officers is not always evidence-based. In some cases, folks are doing what we might call check-the-box, liability training, to protect themselves in case something bad happens.

We need to make sure we have the right people doing the right jobs. Once you do that, you can then begin to design your training around what outcomes you would like to see. We historically have not done outcome-based training. That has changed over the past ten to fifteen years. But one of the things that we still have not gotten really good at is doing long-term evaluations to see how people use their training.

You are now hearing some of the same conversations that happened in the '90s, that we are going to need more officers to get spiking crime under control. I think we need to be very careful about this.

We assume a lot. We assume that people leave the academy and eventually go on the streets and that all of their training is intact. That's not necessarily the case. We really have not been clear about how officers are implementing their training. But body-worn cameras now allow you

to go in and see if officers are using their training or not. This technology has really begun to move police training in ways which we just have not thought about before.

I would also say that the environment in which police learn is pretty important. Not everyone has an academy like NYPD. I don't think the community understands that a lot of police organizations don't have facilities like that. In smaller departments, if they get training once a year, they're lucky.

There are a lot of things we have to look at. We have to look at whether the training is doing what it's supposed to be doing. And then there is the actual officer. What is going on with that individual? How have they digested the training? Are there non-work related issues that are going on with that individual that may be complicating the way that they're showing up at work? And that is just something we've historically never talked about. When you got sick, you still showed up for work. If you were going through a divorce, you showed up for work. If someone was terminally ill in your family, you showed up for work. You've got officers who are traumatized and the culture and the way in which we deal with that is still not healthy. So, for me, training is helpful for a lot of things but there's also some real deep-dive questions still to be asked.

**Do you have a take on why we've seen shootings go up in New York and other cities over the past year or two?**

You have these conditions on the ground that are happening. You have a country that has a tremendous amount of firearms. You also have people who have been locked down. People have lost their jobs and they don't have health care and they're trying to feed their children and care for themselves and their mental health issues. You've got people who are desperate and they don't have anything to lose. I think you also have parts of the community who are telling us that this has been happening for decades, that there's been a lack of investment in people who are most in need.

You are now hearing some of the same conversations that happened in the '90s, that we are going to need more officers to get spiking crime under control. I think we need to be very careful about this. I 100-percent believe that there are occasions where you need to have someone who's armed respond to a call for service. That is my experience. And that is just what it is. But what the community is also asking for—not all communities, but some—what they're asking

for is a lot of investment in prevention and a lot of focus on the social needs that people have and making sure that those things are also taken care of.

It is going to be interesting. We are seeing conversations about how to define public safety. Typically, the first thing you think about public safety is law enforcement. But when you talk to the community about it, the community is not thinking about law enforcement as the first priority for public safety. For them, public safety means housing security. It means food security. It means health care. They want to get those things in alignment and make sure that armed response personnel are not the primary thing you go to when you talk about public health safety. A lot of folks are trying different ways to get to that promise. Those types of experiments are what you're watching play out in Minneapolis and a lot of other places as well.

**In the op-ed that you wrote for *The Washington Post* last year, you expressed sympathy for those who argue for defunding the police, but also said that for the foreseeable future, we're going to need policing to continue to exist. I don't know if it's how you intended it, but I read the piece as you trying to carve a path in between the abolitionists, on the one hand, and the people that believe we have to back the police, no matter what, on the other. I'm wondering what kind of response you got to the piece.**

For me, it's about finding a way to have a conversation where you don't have to pick one or the other. There are clearly spaces where law enforcement does not belong. Because of the historical relationship with Black communities, I get it. I understand the concerns about calling 911. Why would you want to call somebody who comes to you, and you end up either hurt or dead? Every day folks are calling 911, and people are getting hurt, people are getting victimized.

What's happening now is that there is a real conversation about alternative ways to respond. Take domestic violence. When I became an officer, there was no mandatory arrest policy for domestic violence. Then you had a movement and activism around mandatory arrest. Fast forward to today, when you have conversations with community members about domestic violence responses. In communities of color, the question is: why are the police coming? Because when they come, they set up a chain of things that happen that are not helpful for the family.

I can tell you as a police officer, I was really surprised to hear that. There are community members that do not believe police officers should be the first ones to respond to a domestic situation.



And me, I'm thinking, some domestics are very violent. I question how you set it up where you have a service provider walk into a household that may be violent. But those are the kinds of conversations we are having today. The community is asking whether the mandatory arrest policy impacts women and men of color more so than anyone else and whether it is helpful in protecting individuals and family.

Over the last couple of years, there's been a real awakening about how governments are providing service to their community and whether or not there's a political appetite to do what needs to be done for the good of communities. It is creating a tremendous amount of stress for service providers on the ground and for cops on the ground.

You have to allow space for these types of conversations. It's what we've done for the last thirty years. Is it doing what we wanted it to do? Is it having an impact that we never anticipated? And if so, what other things should we be doing? I say all this recognizing that you have folks that absolutely don't want that effort changed. You have to look at it from different perspectives and different lived experiences.

But the community is saying we need to take a deeper dive and really begin to ask ourselves some hard questions. And when we start really thinking about alternatives, it triggers other issues. It triggers issues of power. It triggers issues of who gets served. It triggers budget issues.

Over the last couple of years, there's been a real awakening about how governments are providing service to their community and whether or not there's a political appetite to do what needs to be done for the good of communities. It is creating a tremendous amount of stress for service providers on the ground and for cops on the ground.

We've got to figure out a way to begin to shift things and provide service in a different way. And it doesn't have to be the same in every community. What I'm talking about is customizing public safety for the neighborhood. How do communities define what it means to be safe, and how do we fund that to make sure that they have the safety that they need?

**Talk to me about the history of policing in this country. Some people argue that American policing grows out of slave patrols. And then you have people like former NYPD Commissioner William Bratton who say that the roots of modern policing in the U. S. are in ideas that were first raised in England in the 19th century. Part of me thinks that this is just an academic debate, but part of me actually thinks that it is important to get this right, because it has implications for how we see our current problems with policing. Do you have any thoughts about that?**

It's not one or the other. You need to learn the whole story, the whole experience. I had the pleasure and honor of working for Commissioner Bratton. I had many conversations with him about race and policing. He understands it. He gets it. He understands the whole ugly truth, the whole history.

You hear conversations about Sir Robert Peel and the [19th-century] principles of policing that were brought over to the United States [from Britain]. That is true. But the roots of how we manage Black bodies clearly comes from our history and from slave patrols. When we talk about the Great Migration and Black folks trying to leave the South to go North for a better life, they're met with the exact same thing—they were told to stay in this neighborhood, don't think about taking these jobs. It's the same thing.

This is what the conversations with police officers around race are about. They need to understand that slave patrols and Jim Crow laws and redlining—this is a part of our culture. Understanding that doesn't mean you can't also understand Robert Peel's principles, which are, on their face, absolutely on point. Police are part of the community. But how those principles got implemented has been very erratic when you're talking about policing in the United States.

One of the things that we have to be careful with is really trying to step over the bad part of our history. I think people often think when they hear talk about Jim Crow laws and things like that that it is ancient history, and why are we still talking about it. It is not ancient history. My mother is eighty-three. There are a lot of elders in our community who lived through this. This is not ancient history.

I think that when people are uncomfortable, they have a tendency to want to move through it. And that's not what's being asked for here. What's being asked is that you understand what that uniform represents in different communities and what it has meant historically. When you

can do that, then you can spend time in the community and not feel that you need to control the room and control the narrative. We don't teach how to listen in the academy, for the most part. That's a hard tactic to learn—to sit, to take it in. It's going to make you feel some kind of way. How do you manage that? How do you manage being uncomfortable? There used to be an effort to try to make cops feel comfortable around these types of topics. That's not happening anymore. There's pure exhaustion around trying to make somebody feel okay about what is wrong.

Black folks are not all monolithic, they're not all thinking the same way. They're not all in agreement. That means that you have to create spaces where you're hearing from a tremendous number of people. And that is the challenge for a lot of chiefs right now: how do you provide service for multiple perspectives around public safety?

**The Center for Policing Equity's motto is "justice through science." I'm curious about how the organization is navigating the current moment when it feels like you have some on the right who are questioning the very notion of science. And then on the left, you have some academics who won't acknowledge that there's evidence that policing can make a positive difference. Does that make the terrain complicated for your organization?**

At CPE, we have under our roof social scientists, of course, but we also have activists, we have former police officers, we have people from the community. We have incredible people who have chosen to join CPE. Because we are science-based, our North Star is what we believe will work. We have very difficult conversations on both the left and on the right about what policing should look like. We pride ourselves to be able to have those kinds of conversations with everybody. We try to bring unlikely folks into the same space. For us, it is about what is best for the community, what is best for public safety, and what is best for the police officers. But some days are hard, really hard.

**I've heard you say that the window of opportunity for change is only going to stay open for a short time. Are you feeling optimistic, pessimistic, or something in between when you think about the conversation about policing in this country?**

I'm always going to be somewhere in between, because I've lived through these cycles before. I do think that for policing itself, as a profession, there's some self-reflection that is happening. But for me, the question is at what level is that happening? Because there's always been a political disconnect between what the chiefs may want versus what the folks on the ground who do this

every day are asking for. And so there has to be some internal reckoning around who are we and what are we supposed to be and to who.

Everybody wants the cops to be one way or another, but no one can give a straight answer when I ask them: what is their role? If their role is no longer to respond to X problem, then tell them that and train them for that. If their role is no longer to make low-level traffic stops, then tell them that, and train them for that. You also have to leave space for the human condition. In any employee setting, they're going to be asking questions. And this is where we often find leadership breaks down. When officers ask, "Why are we doing this?" or, "What's going on?," oftentimes leadership can't answer that question. There's a void of silence.

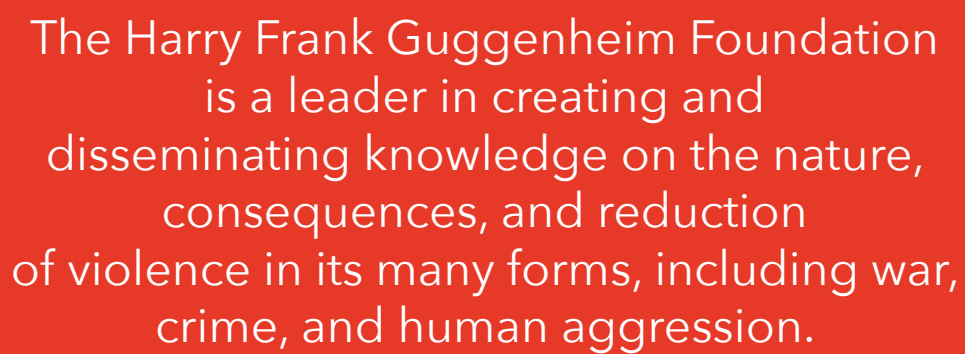
I think that most cops have awareness of why we're in this moment, but there's still quite a few of them who don't understand how we got here. And there are also some that don't think it's an issue and think this is something that was created just to divide folks. So I would tell you that many police chiefs today feel like they are walking through land mines.

Over the next five to ten years, it's going to be interesting to look back to see what is really different. I see the people on the ground who are committed to doing the work. There is a tremendous amount of heart and optimism on the ground that we will get to the other side and that it will look and feel different. And so I tend to latch onto that. ●

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