**WRITTEN TESTIMONY BEFORE**
**THE HOUSE JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE ON**
**CRIME, TERRORISM, AND HOMELAND SECURITY**

**REDUCING VIOLENT CRIME & BUILDING TRUST:**
**THE WHITE PLAINS, NY EXPERIENCE**

**June 10, 2008**

**Frank G. Straub, Ph.D.**
**Commissioner**
**City of White Plains, NY**
**Department of Public Safety**

**fstraub@ci.white-plains.ny.us**
**(914) 422-6350**

Thank you, Chairman Scott, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify about the successful community policing strategies implemented by the City of White Plains, NY, Department of Public Safety. These strategies have reduced violent crime and gang activity, improved communication between our young people and the police, and continue to build trust in our neighborhoods. I am Frank Straub, the Commissioner of Public Safety for the City of White Plains, New York.

**Introduction.**

In 2000, the City of White Plains began to redevelop its downtown, replacing shuttered storefronts and vacant lots with luxury condominiums, 44-story residential and office towers, exclusive retail stores, pubs and restaurants. In seven years, the city has added more than 4,000 new residents, bringing the racially diverse urban population close to 60,000. During the day the number of workers and shoppers more than quadruples, with an estimated 250,000 people circulating on the city's streets. Downtown White Plains, like commercial districts in many cities, has rapidly become a study in contradictions, a place where the rich mingle with the poor, where a Ritz Carlton hotel is only a few blocks away from the city's public housing complexes. And like other cities, the factors that drive crime and violence – poverty, unemployment, drugs, guns and gangs - impact crime in White Plains. During the past six years, the White Plains police department has implemented a series of initiatives that have dramatically reduced serious crime and violence. However, crime statistics tell only part of the story. The other part describes how the department is using traditional and non-traditional policing strategies to disrupt street violence, assist prisoners re-enter into the community, and improve police – community relations.

**Grim Facts**

In many cities today, the value of maintaining "street cred" has made senseless killing and assaults legitimized responses to the most minor snubs and slights. "The

violence," according to criminologist David Kennedy, "is much less about drugs and money than about girls, vendettas and trivial social frictions. The code of the street has reached a point in which not responding to a slight can destroy a reputation, while violence is a sure way to enhance it."[1] Poverty, a lack of opportunity, disrupted families and hopelessness exacerbate the counterproductive street ethos that is driving a nationwide surge in youth violence. In poor and disadvantaged African-American neighborhoods homicide is ranked among the leading causes of death among young men.

A 2006 report, *A Gathering Storm –Violent Crime In America*, by the Police Executive Research Forum, underscored FBI findings that violent crime increased nationwide in 2005 and 2006, reversing the significant decreases achieved during the previous twelve years. In some cities such as Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Newark, Orlando and Philadelphia, homicides had increased by 20 percent or more during that two-year period. In most cities, the majority of the homicide victims were young African-American males. The murder rate for African-Americans is more than three times the national average: 19 African-American murder victims per 100,000 people versus five for the general population. According to the U. S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2007), seventy-seven percent of African-American male homicide victims, between the ages of 17 and 29, were killed with a firearm.[2]

A follow-up PERF study, *Violent Crime in America: A Tale of Two Cities*, published in November 2007 reported that although some cities had begun to reverse the trend, violent crime continued to increase in other jurisdictions. The FBI's preliminary crime report for the first six months of 2007 indicated that murder rates jumped 4.9% in

---

[1] Kennedy, David (2006, August 13). *The Neighborhood War Zone*. Washington Post, p. B01.
[2] Harrell, Erika (2007, August). *Black Victims of Violent Crime*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ214258.

metropolitan counties and 3.2% in cities with 50,000 to 99,999 inhabitants, two

categories that apply to White Plains.[3] Of the 168 police departments surveyed by PERF,

the highest ranked factor contributing to violent crime was gangs, followed by juvenile

crime. According to Mayor R.T. Rybak of Minneapolis:

> One of the main drivers (of crime) – certainly in our case, the main driver – was
> the increase in violence committed by juveniles…juveniles who had far greater
> access to guns, juveniles who were more willing to pull the trigger, juveniles who
> were less connected to traditional gangs, and were more connected to arbitrary
> gangs. All of that led to a much more chaotic experience out on the streets.[4]

Nearly two-thirds of the surveyed police departments tied impulsive violence to

behaviors perceived as demonstrating a lack of respect ("dissing" or "disrespect" in street

parlance), unemployment, poverty, and prisoner re-entry to the rise in violence.

In response to the surge in violent crime, and the public's demand for quick,

impressive action, many police departments have moved away from community policing,

relying instead on traditional law enforcement strategies to fight crime.[5] Tactical

enforcement teams, "stop and frisk" initiatives, neighborhood sweeps, gang injunctions[6],

and public housing "bar outs"[7] have been used to target and reduce violent crime. In

times of "crisis," police and political leaders have declared "crime emergencies"

increasing patrols in hard-hit neighborhoods, establishing curfews and cordoning off

neighborhoods to create "safe zones." Closed circuit camera networks, gun shot detection

and location systems, facial and pattern recognition technologies have vastly expanded

---

[3] Federal Bureau of Investigation (2008, January 7). *Crime in the United States: Preliminary Semiannual Uniform Crime Report, January – June*. Retrieved from http://fbi.gov?ucr/prelim2007/index.html
[4] Police Executive Research Forum (2007, November). *Violent Crime in America: "A Tale of Two Cities," p.* 11.
[5] For example, see Buntin, John (2008, June). *Gundemic*. Governing, vol. 21, no. 9, pps 24-30.
[6] A gang injunction is a court order that prohibits alleged gang members and their associates from doing certain things, including associating with one another, loitering and other activities, within a defined area or neighborhood.
[7] A "no-trespass" policy used by public housing authorities to reduce drug activity and other crimes.

surveillance capabilities and created police omnipresence. This has created tensions

between the police and law abiding citizens residing in some minority communities.

**Police Do Matter**

Police executives must take the lead in reducing street violence as well as shaping

the broader social context through non-traditional community policing strategies that

work to restore stability in our hardest hit neighborhoods. In a 2001 Civic Report, *Do*

*Police Matter? An Analysis of the Impact of New York City's Police Reforms*, prepared

for the Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, criminologists George L.

Kelling and William H. Sousa, Jr. wrote:

> We have no doubt that in some neighborhoods, changing drug use patterns
> and family values have had an important impact on local crime reduction.
> Likewise, in some neighborhoods, the number of youth can have an impact
> on level of crime. Indeed, all of those factors that can have an impact on crime-
> demographics, drug use patterns, imprisonment rates, prosecutorial and court
> policies, weapon availability, and so on – can and do have an impact on crime
> levels. But the strength and direction of their impacts is always dependent on the
> local context – *and police, by their activities, can help shape that strength and
> direction* (emphasis added).[8]

As Kelling and Sousa convey, the police matter and the impact local police

leadership can have on community issues cannot be understated. However, traditional

policing strategies alone are not solving the problems that confront the hardest hit

neighborhoods. As a result of our nation's "war on crime," a staggering 2.3 million

people are now incarcerated in the United States, according to the Pew Center on the

States report, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, and about 5 million citizens are

on probation and/or parole. More than 1 in every 100 adults is confined in an American

jail or prison. For some demographic groups, the incarceration numbers are especially

---

[8] Kelling, George L. and William H. Sousa (2001, December). *Do Police Matter? An Analysis of the Impact of New York City's Police Reforms.* New York: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, Civic Report No. 22, p. 19.

startling. While one in thirty men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars, for African-American males in that age group the number is 1in 9. In the poorest communities, as many as 20% of adult men are locked up on any given day, and there is hardly a family without a father, son, brother, or uncle who has not been incarcerated. Gender adds another dimension to the equation. Although men still are roughly 10 times more likely to go to jail or prison, the female incarcerated population is burgeoning at a brisker pace. For African-American women in their mid to late 30's, the incarceration rate has also hit the 1 in 100 mark.

The strong emphasis on "law and order," with the resulting increase in incarceration has torn a hole in our social fabric. Incarceration breaks up families and disrupts social networks, deprives siblings, spouses and parents of emotional and financial support, and ruins opportunities for young people to finish school and get jobs. People released from jails and prisons find it difficult to reintegrate into their communities. They are virtually unemployable, find it difficult to secure adequate housing, and suffer from a lack of medical, mental health, and drug treatment services. A street culture has been created, among young African-American men in which serving time in prison is normal and even valued. According to National Public Radio correspondent and political analyst Juan Williams, "in some neighborhoods … going to jail becomes a rite of passage for a young male to prove himself."[9] Even more worrying, is the sense of hopelessness experienced by young men in our hardest hit African-American neighborhoods, many of whom believe their lives will end in prison or violently on the street.

---

[9] Williams, Juan (2006). *Enough: The phony leaders, dead-end movements, and the culture of failure that are undermining Black America – and what we can do about it*. New York:  Three Rivers Press, p. 121.

Communities of color suffer from the imposition of aggressive and indiscriminate police tactics as well as from the failure of such tactics to bring peace and stability to their neighborhoods. Stepped-up enforcement of public ordinances and the use of aggressive stop and frisk tactics can increase tension between the police and minority communities which view such tactics as intrusive, oppressive, misguided and frequently based on racial profiling if they are not implemented appropriately and monitored closely. The *broken windows* theory*,* advanced by Wilson and Kelling (1982), in which the police and the community bring order to public places by addressing quality of life issues, has morphed into a *zero-tolerance* strategy in which the police use fines, arrests and incarceration to rid neighborhoods of problem persons, frequently disorderly or inebriated people, rowdy groups of teens, or the homeless.

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

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

---

[10] Anderson, Elijah (1999). *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 320.

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

## *The White Plains Paradigm*

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

The police department increased foot, bike, mounted and motorcycle patrols in the downtown. The Neighborhood Conditions Unit stepped up quality of life enforcement

in crime hot spots and in the city's public housing complexes. The Intelligence Unit identified and focused on high-risk offenders and their "crews." Detectives arrested gang members at the same time the Community Policing Division began conducting home visits to interrupt potential violence. Representatives from the police department and the city's Youth Bureau met with members of the community, activists and black ministers who expressed concern regarding the increased gang activity, violence, conflicts downtown and in public housing. The meetings were very challenging. Community members demanded that the police department take action at the same time they angrily described conflicts with the police and past incidents that generated animosity and distrust in the African-American community.

Following the meetings, the police department and the city's youth bureau partnered with the North American Family Institute (NAFI)[11], a Massachusetts-based social service organization, to develop and implement a program to reduce violence among the city's youth and improve community – police relations. NAFI was selected, in part, because it had developed successful programs to improve relations between recruit police officers assigned to patrol inner city neighborhoods in Baltimore and Boston and the community.

The first White Plains session of the Youth-Police Initiative (YPI) brought young African-American men from Winbrook and police officers assigned to the neighborhood conditions unit (NCU) together to discuss the recent violence, gang activity, and youth-police interactions. NCU officers were purposely selected because their assignments in public housing complexes and downtown frequently placed them in "conflict-prone"

---

[11] Additional information concerning the North American Family Institute can be found at: http://www.nafi.com

situations with the young men. In subsequent training sessions, recruit officers participated as part of their field training, and other sessions matched police officers assigned to neighborhood "hot zones" and the young men and women who lived there.

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

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

Team building exercises are intentionally held outdoors, in the heart of Winbrook and other public housing complexes, so the residents can see them occurring. This very public demonstration of youth – police interaction has generated significant interest,

curiosity, and favorable responses from the residents. For many, this may be the first time they've seen the police engaged in positive interactions with the young men and women who live in the neighborhood. Additionally, the team building exercises create opportunities to discuss the program with the residents as well as more general police-community issues. The publicly held team building exercises have sent a clear message that the department is trying to improve relations with the community.

The final YPI event is a celebration dinner for the participants, the young men and women's families, political and religious leaders, and community members to recognize the participants and their success in completing the program. During the dinner, each of the participants discussed their experiences during the training as well as their plans to continue building effective relationships. At the first dinner about fifty people attended, including the participants. At the fourth dinner, held in April 2008, over two hundred people attended and support for the program continues to build among the city's community, religious and political leaders.

There is no single response to youth violence and gang involvement. Long term solutions require comprehensive, collaborative responses that offer real alternatives, individualized services, support and mentoring. The youth bureau's Step Up program, based on the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Gang Model Program[12], is a critical component of the city's efforts to combat gang activity and

---

[12] The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model focuses primarily on youth gang members or at-risk youth less than 22 years of age. The model holds that the lack of social opportunities available to this population and the degree of social disorganization present in a community largely account for its youth gang problem. The model is based on five strategies – community mobilization, opportunities provision, social intervention, suppression, and organizational change and development.

 Step-Up is coordinated by a steering committee comprised of the Department of Public Safety, Youth Bureau, School District, the White Plains Community that Cares Coalition, faith-based institutions, parents and youth. Opportunities are provided through the Youth-Police Initiative and outreach/case management. A direct intervention team consisting of the outreach/case manager, police, probation, school

street violence. At-risk or gang-involved youth come into the program in one of three ways. Police officers refer youth to Step Up as an alternative to incarceration, or as part of the department's prisoner re-entry program. Youth Bureau outreach workers identify youth in neighborhood hot zones. And most recently, some of the young men and women participating in Step Up have recruited their friends. Once engaged, the young men and women receive individualized case management and wrap-around services to address personal issues such as truancy, poor school performance, unemployment, fatherhood/ motherhood, drug and alcohol addiction.

The "success" of the Step Up model is evaluated from two perspectives. The first perspective concerns whether the young men and women reduce their risk level as determined by a case worker. Risk is assessed in the following areas – family functioning, substance abuse (family or self), peer relationships (including gang affiliation), academic performance, school behavioral incidents, clarity and substance of achievable secondary education and/or career goals, and the stability of housing. Once the risk level is determined an individualized plan is created that includes specific strategies to reduce the highest 2-3 risk areas. Early evaluation of Step Up indicates that individual risk levels have been significantly reduced and sustained over time, across all areas, by the 12th month of participation.

The second perspective explores whether the number of negative police contacts increases or decreases while the young men and women are engaged in Step Up and once they have completed it.  Among the 87 young men and women who have participated to date, there has been a significant decrease in the number of negative police contacts. Prior

representatives and others assist participating youth.  Suppression of gang activity is provided by the Steering Committee partners as well as the promotion of organizational change to reduce gang involvement.

to entering Step Up, the 87 youth averaged 3.3 negative police contacts, while

participating in the program the number dropped to 0.7 contacts, and upon completion,

the number decreased to 0.1 negative police contacts.

The following stories describe the impact that Step Up and the youth police

initiative have had on two of the young men who participated in the programs:

**Derrick**

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

> While in jail and upon his release, a Step Up case manager worked with Derrick to find him a job and he was subsequently hired by the youth bureau to staff the teen lounge and gym. Currently, the case manager is working with him to help him earn his GED, so he can apply to college. Derrick participated in the youth-police initiative. He is no longer gang involved.

**Jonathan**

> Jonathan is a twenty year old African-American male from the Winbrook housing project. He had a history of dropping out of school, selling drugs and stealing. As a result, he was barred out of the housing project. In 2006, he attended a YPI celebration dinner to "check it out." Wearing a "hoody," he and a couple of members of his crew sat in the corner and watched the event. He subsequently became involved in the youth bureau's basketball program and was recruited to Step Up. He received financial assistance, enrolled in, and was accepted by a community college. He will receive his GED and start earning college credits.

Although there is limited scholarly research regarding the impact of positive youth-

police engagement, the youth-police initiative and Step Up, although relatively new, have

decreased negative youth-police contacts, helped reduce violence, and provided a first

step to solving broader police-community problems in White Plains.

Derrick's story is illustrative of the successes being achieved through the police department's prisoner re-entry program. The prisoner re-entry program, the first in Westchester County, assists individuals leaving the County Jail and returning to the White Plains community. Every month, a multi-discipline team led by the White Plains police department, meets with inmates selected to participate in the re-entry initiative. The team members, representing social service, not-for-profit, religious and other organizations, discuss the resources they can provide to the inmates - employment, housing, education, mental health, AIDS counseling and support, fatherhood and/or motherhood education upon their return to the community. The police department informs the inmates that they must change the behavior that led to their incarceration, and the probation department explains the repercussions of future offending. The team conveys a unified message that the White Plains community is aware of the inmate's pending release, that the community is concerned for them, and will assist them in leading productive lives, however, future offending will not be tolerated. In 2007, the re-entry team met with eighty-four inmates in the County Jail. To date, only seven of the inmates who participated in the re-entry program were re-arrested for any offense upon their return to the White Plains community.

Six years ago, the White Plains police department committed to a policing paradigm that would fight crime on all fronts. On one front, the department uses traditional strategies to target high-rate offenders, their illegal activities, and neighborhood hot spots. On the other, the department's community policing division has taken the lead in developing and implementing non-traditional programs to target the factors that drive crime and violence. During the past six years serious crime has declined

by 40% to the lowest level in 42 years. There has not been a homicide in the city since May 2006, and serious crime continues to fall in 2008. In January 2007, the editorial board of the Journal News, Westchester County's largest newspaper wrote:

> After … a series of worrisome crimes last fall, the police didn't get defensive, they got to work. They and their commissioner seem determined to face and prevent crime in the city – not let it define it.
>
> (The) police have put additional emphasis on what matters to average people…The department is involved in the "Step Up" program, a multi-agency effort to open up mentoring and job opportunities for at-risk youth. And it is committed to keeping police foot and car patrols highly visible.[13]

The White Plains police department did not let a series of violent incidents define the city or allow gang activity to take hold. The police department took the lead, adopting a strong approach to end the violence and built effective and sustained police-community-other government agency partnerships during the past six years. In the end, the White Plains policing paradigm confirms that the police matter and that by their actions, enforcement and community building, they can shape and define the factors that impact crime in the local context.

---

[13] The Editorial Board (2007, January 13). *Against the Grain on Crime: White Plains Police, Citizens Deserve Kudos.* The Journal News, p. 6B

# REFERENCES

Anderson, Elijah (1999). *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Buntin, John (2008, June). *Gundemic*. Governing, vol. 21, no. 9.

Editorial Board (2007, January 13). Against the Grain on Crime: White Plains Police, Citizens Deserve Kudos. The Journal News.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (2008, January 7). *Crime in the United States: Preliminary Semiannual Uniform Crime report, January-June*. Retrieved from http://fbi.gov?ucr/prelim2007/index.html

Harrell, Erika (2007, August). *Black Victims of Violent Crime*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ 214258.

Kelling, George L. and William H. Sousa (2001, December). *Do Police Matter? An Analysis of the Impact of New York City's Police Reforms*. New York: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, Civic Report No. 22.

Kennedy, David (2006, August 13). *The Neighborhood War Zone*. Washington Post.

Pew Center on the States (2008, February). One in 100: Behind Bars in America. Retrieved from www.pewcenteronthestates.org.

Police Executive Research Forum (2006, October). *A Gathering Storm-Violent Crime in America*. Washington, D.C.

Police Executive Research Forum (2007, November). *Violent Crime in America: "A Tale of Two Cities."* Washington, D.C.

Santos, Fernanda (2007, June 29). *In a Room, Police and Youth Talk, and Maybe See Their Similarities*. The New York Times.

Williams, Juan (2006). *Enough: The phony leaders, dead-end movements, and the culture of failure that are undermining Black America – and what we can do about it*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Wilson, James Q. and George L. Kelling (1982, March). *The Police and Neighborhood Safety*. The Atlantic.