Violence, Race and the Police

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I. The Epidemic of Urban Violence

The most urgent crime problem facing urban police

departments is an epidemic of violence among young, black

men. The numbers are striking. From 1984-1988, the homicide

rate among African-American men aged 15-24 increased by

nearly 50%.[1]

The epidemic growth dramatizes a fact that has long

been true and widely known in the African-American

community, but not widely noted outside it: murder is the

leading cause of death for this population -- surpassing

traffic accidents by a comfortable margin, and leaving

1 Of course, homicides were increasing generally during this
period, and this group has always been more vulnerable to
homiceds than others. Nonetheless, the growth in homicides
was greater than for any other. As a resulty, the ration of
the homicide rate for this group to that of the nation as a
hwol increased from an average of 1.45 over the preceding
decade to more than 1.6 in the years 1986 and 1987. (Cook)

ordinary diseases such as cancer far behind.[2] These deaths
constitute one of the principal reasons for the wide gap in
life expectancy between this population and others.[3] No
other population in America dies as young as Afro-American
males.

As disturbing as the level of victimization are the
circumstances surrounding these deaths. Most commonly, they
result from disputes among peers that turn violent and, in
the presence of weapons (particularly guns), become lethal.[4]
Many seem to emerge from nothing more than the imagined
slurs and petty rivalries that mark adolescent life. Others
have more organized bases and motivations; for example, they
stem from the rituals and requirements of teen-aged gangs,
or the economic conflicts associated with the illegal drug
trade.

Such circumstances bear the tell-tale markings of
failed families and limited individual opportunities that
characterize much urban crime. They also look as though they
might be preventable. Both aspects of the violence sharpen
the tragedy of these losses.

2 Rosenberg and Mercy
3 Mercy
4 Ibid

Sometimes the violence spills out onto other populations. Reportedly, random "drive-by shootings" are now more prevalent.[5] In some cases, innocent victims have been caught in the cross-fire of gang conflicts. (A recent example would be the shooting that occurred in the New York City movie theatre when Godfather III opened.) In other cases, the attacks have been aimed at the victim, but the target was arbitrarily selected. (Examples would include the "wilding attack" on the jogger in Central Park, and the fatal Halloween beating of the homeless man in Brooklyn.)

The randomness and viciousness of the violence can change the public perception of the problem. Instead of seeing the violence as a tragedy for the black community, it can be seen as a threat to the wider community. Instead of seeing young black men as victims of the violence, they can be seen as dangerous predators. In fact, to some degree, society is torn between these two different perceptions of the problem: as a tragedy for the minority community, or a threat to the majority community. Both are true.

The question for our discussion is this: how should police executives and police departments respond to this problem? To a great degree, this is an operational question. One must figure out how to use patrol officers, detectives, narcotics control units, and anti-gang squads to halt the

5 Sherman

violence in effective, non-intrusive ways. That is at the
core of our professional commitment to policing.

But how best to respond is also importantly a
political question, in the sense that the response the
police should make will be importantly guided by concerns
for maintaining relationships with local minority
communities. The reasons are essentially two.

First, the political response that local minority
communities make to police initiatives will have an
important bearing on their sustainability, legitimacy, and
perceived effectiveness. That support will not come without
efforts to cultivate it by consulting with the minority
community, tailoring police responses to their concerns, and
learning how to discuss the problem in ways that are not
offensive to the community. Moreover, given the legacy of
past suspicions and mutual disappointments between the
police and the minority community, any failure to mobilize
political support will leave police operations an easy mark
for critics. Due to the past failures, a claim that the
police are relying on brutal and racist tactics to deal with
the problem is always a plausible political claim, and can
be counted on to rouse significant community support. The
only way to counteract this historically created
vulnerability is for the police to work extra hard at the

political problem of finding ways to work with rather than on the minority community.

Second, in order to be able to reach the violence through the least intrusive measures, the police must find ways to build trust with those in the community who can inform them about the immediate causes of the violence, and who is involved. They may also need many in the community to help fashion a broader response to violence that would include additional recreation programs, parental support for curfews, and so on. Without this sort of support, the operational tactics will inevitably be less discriminating and more intrusive than they otherwise would be, and less widely aided by community self-help efforts than they need to be in order to succeed.

In these important respects, then, an effective response to the epidemic of violence among young black men requires an effective political approach to the black community as well as an effective operational approach to the problem. The two are inseperably intertwined. Without an effective political approach, the operations are unlikely to achieve their immediate or long range goals. Without an effective operational approach, political support cannot long be maintined.

Politics are rooted in perceptions and values as much as in facts. They are also shaped as much by past struggles as by current realities. Indeed, it may be that the past legacy of mistrust between the police and the minority communities is the principal obstacle to the police developing a political and operational approach to the problem. As a necessary first step in designing a response to the epidemic of violence, then, it may be very important for police executives to learn to understand how the problem looks to the communities now beset by violence, and what role the community thinks the police might play in dealing with that problem. It is against that set of perceptions that the quality of the response they make will importantly be judged; and it is that set of judgments that will importantly influence their operational success.

II. The Changing Perceptions of Minority Communities

One important consequence of the epidemic of violence is that the posture of many in the minority community to the police might well be changing. As Samuel Walker has shown, the minority community has long been disappointed by the police. For at least half a century, the minority community has complained about "the lack of efficient and equal service; harrassment and discourtesy;

discriminatory arrests; excessive use of force (physical brutality, unwarranted use of dealy force); and racial discrimination in recruitment.[6]

Despairing of any likely improvement in police practices, many of the most politically active members of the black community have sharply criticized the police, and pronounced them at best irrelevant, and, more frequently, positively harmful to the interests of the black community. The sharp criticism has often discouraged the police from seeking a closer working partnership with the black community.

In addition, many of the strongest, community-oriented groups (including the Black Muslims), have decided that since they cannot rely on the police to exercise social control in appropriate ways, they will have to rely on themselves instead. In a white community, the police might well view such efforts as an asset. Against the backdrop of angry rhetoric about the broader society and the police, however, this sort of mobilization becomes a threat to the police. And that, too, has often discouraged the police from seeking too close a relationship.

6 Walker, 1980, p.225

Now, however, the awful sense that a generation of young black men is being lost, and with them, any future hope for the community, has encouraged many community-oriented black citizens to re-consider these positions. As one person we talked to explained, "We can no longer recognize our own children."[7] Among the older working class people living in the neighborhoods in which the violence is concentrated, one senses a growing desire for a stronger, more decisive and determined police response. Among some black elites, one can also find a firm conviction that the police could become a valuable partner to the community in ending the epidemic of violence, if only they would do so in the right way. The hopes of both groups are kindled by the increasing representation of blacks among the leaders of urban police departments. They are also emboldened to demand more effective police services because, over the last few decades, they have become enfranchised stakeholders in the communities in which they live.

These emergent attitudes do not yet appear in the opinion polls. There, minority citizens still express greater suspicions of the police than do white citizens.[8] Nor do they routinely appear in the public rhetoric of minority leaders. Part of the reason may be that, while minority citizens are willing to discuss their worries and

7 Personnel Communication
8 Footnote on poll data showing racial differences in attitudes toward police

fears about young black men among one another, they are reluctant to do so before white audiences for fear that these views will confirm and harden white prejudices against all African-Americans.[9]

But another reason is almost certainly that many minority citizens, mindful of a half century of apparent police indifference to their criticisms, remain reluctant to trust very much to the police. They worry that the police response will be guided by police diagnoses and interests rather than theirs. They also despair that the common response -- arrest and incarceration -- offers too little hope to the community. As one black citizen commented, "The criminal justice system just takes people away. And when they do, we know that the system does not have their best interests at heart."

To some, of course, the idea that the criminal justice system "takes people away" is precisely the point. In their view, the principal contribution that the criminal justice system can make to the welfare of poor minority communities is to free them from the depradations (and the example) of the violent young men who are now tormenting them.

9 We have anecdotal evidence of this from private conversations with black criminal justice officials.

Yet, plausible and important as that view might be, one can easily understand the minority community's ambivalence towards this idea when one realizes that the criminal justice system's promise to relieve the community of their tormentors feels to the community, to a very great degree, to be a false one. Part of the problem is that the police often seem to get the wrong people -- at least when compared to community perceptions of who deserves punishment.[10] They arrest the working man who gets caught up in a barroom brawl and miss the extortionist in the housing project. They arrest the juveniles dealing in marijuana and miss the ruthless crack dealer who is spreading the drug through the community. They catch the old man who exposes himself to adolescent girls, but miss the man who rapes and assaults his common-law wife.

Of course, all may deserve arrest. But what is frustrating is that the technical problems of making arrests combine with community fears and mistrust of the police to shield some offenders who are far more deserving of punishment and control than those who are actually arrested.[11]

10 On the importance of arresting the right people, see the discussion of guerilla war in Michael Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie.
11For a discussion of the factors that go into making people arrestable, see Donald Black, "the Social Production of Arrest. See also, Mark H. Moore, "Invisible Offenses".

Another part of the problem, however, is that justice is far from swift or sure even when the police have arrested an important threat to the community. Many arrested offenders return relatively quickly to the community. This can occur because there was insufficient evidence to hold them, or because there was sufficient evidence, but the police screwed up in collecting or preserving it, or the prosecutor screwed up in presenting it.[12] It can also occur because there are not enough jails or prisons to hold offenders who are justly accused and convicted of crimes.[13] The average time served in prisons in New York for those sentenced is two and a half years.[14] That may seem pretty long to those who are sentenced, but it may seem pretty short to those who are unexpectedly greeted by an embittered convicted offender whom they thought had been "sent away" for his crimes.

So, even if the minority citizens and criminal justice officials agreed that minority communities could be helped by removing violent young men from these communities, it is by no means clear that the criminal justice system, as presently operated, could reliably produce this result. The fact that it cannot deliver what it promises to deliver makes many in the minority community doubt its competence and integrity as well as its efficacy in solving their

12 Vera Institute of Justice, Felony Case Attrition.
13 General Discussion of Jail and Prison Overcrowding
14 Personal Communication, Michael Smith, August 1, 1991.)

problems.

But there is an even deeper problem for minority citizens: they cannot see how their community can survive without some positive contributions from the young men who are now their problem.[15] In principle, these young men are the future wage earners who can ameliorate the poverty of the community. They are the fathers who can instill discipline in the next generation of young men.[16] They are the husbands who can offer emotional support to the hard-pressed women now living alone at their wits end. If there is no prospect of restoring these young men to these functions and roles, then the community cannot even survive, let alone flourish.

Finally, there is the despair that comes from seeing a generation of human talent wasted. Against the backdrop of a past history of active discrimination, that despair is transformed into a deep suspicion that what is happening to the community is not just an accident, but the planned result of a larger conspiracy, or at least an intended result that is politically acceptable to the majority community.

15 W. J. Wilson
16 Ron J. Ferguson

13

So, while hope blooms eternal in the minority community, and blossoms with particular urgency in the face of the crisis facing it, that hope is nonetheless dimmed by continuing ambivalence about whether the communities can trust the police to help them in the right way. To consider whether that is possible, it is important to consider the current epidemic of urban violence from the police perspective.

III. The Conventional Police Response

Traditionally, the police encounter the epidemic of violence among young black men as an operational problem. They do not see it as a tragedy for a community. Nor do they see it as an issue that raises a difficult political problem for the minority community to discuss among themselves and with the majority community.

Moreover, the problem seems importantly theirs to handle. They are responsible for enforcing the laws, and maintaining the peace. To allow the violence to continue without some police response would be an unconscionable dereliction of their duties. While other agencies may have something important to contribute to the solution of the problem, assaults and murders committed with weapons must be centrally their business.

Exactly how the police should respond to the
violence, however, is problematic. Its most difficult
feature as it now presents itself is its apparent
"randomness" as reflected in three different aspects.

First, the victims seem arbitrarily selected.
Teenagers are viciously attacked and seriously injured in
response to nothing more than imagined slurs. Citizens
become targets of teenagers cruising for excitement for no
more reason that they came into view and appeared
vulnerable. Innocent bystanders are caught in the crossfire
of a gang dispute.

Second, the motivations of the offenders seem
irrational -- almost inhuman. The offenders seem to assault
and kill for the excitement, or to avenge small sleights, or
to live up to the crazy expectations and rituals of youth
gangs.

Third, it seems that violence can erupt anywhere.
Perfectly ordinary places such as schools, movie theatres,
or the streets in broad daylight become the theaters of
violence. People with no prior records of violence suddenly
"lose it" in a dispute over a girl or a foul in a basketball
game.

The apparent randomness and viciousness of the violence causes police tacticians to respond to the violence in particular ways. Because the abitrariness of the victimization spreads fear throughout the population, a special a special urgency is given to control efforts. Because the situation feels "out of control", methods that would otherwise seem to drastic now seem appropriate.

Because it is difficult to locate the particular situations that occasion violence, or the particular individuals who are committing it, the police must resort to very broad actions to deal with the problem. They are forced to see and analyze the problem as something that emerges unpredictably and frighteningly from a broad class of people -- namely young black men. To deal with that problem, the police rely on broadly intrusive tactics that harken back to policies and procedures of the past. The Boston police, for example have responded to the increased violence in that city's poor communities with curfews and more aggressive efforts to stop and question young, black men.[17]

Such policies now seem more acceptable not only because the problem seems more urgent, but also because there is greater support for these policies in parts of the

17 Boston Globe articles on police methods used to deal with violence. James Shannon's report

minority community. Indeed, it is significant that some of these approaches have been initiated by black police executives, and executed by black police officers.

The rest of the department embraces these with a certain amount of relief, since they are both familiar, and expressive of a preferred way of dealing with the threat of urban violence: namely, to meet the violence with the department's own overwhelming capacity to use force and authority. Given the limited ability of the police to see into the circumstances that are producing the violence, more surgical interventions seem too difficult and too time consuming to design. Similarly, broader interventions based on actions taken by community groups or other public agencies seem too complex to organize, and too flimsy operationally to command much confidence among the determined police.

Finally, because the police reasonably consider themselves at risk in countering the increased violence, they quite reasonably take steps to reduce their own vulnerabilities. They wrap bullet proof vests around themselves, and holster more powerful weapons. More importantly, they become guarded in their interactions with citizens. They retreat behind the wheels of their car and reduce the number of informal contacts with citizens on

their street. They even ignore minor offenses they observe
on the street, causing many in the community to believe that
the police have given up and lost control. When they finally
respond to minor street offenses, they respond unilaterally,
in force, rather than as individual officers who are relying
on the support of the community in their enforcement
actions.

No doubt, there is some wisdom contained in the
broad outlines of this response. Some broad and urgent
response to the situation is required. Tactical adjustments
to ensure the safety of officers are also required. Yet, the
traditional police responses to the problem of random
violence among young minority men -- to patrol more
aggressively in the places where the violence is occurring,
to back off from informal contact with the community -- have
not lost their potential for escalating rather than quieting
the violence. Indeed, it was precisely these tactics that
helped to establish the context of the riots of the mid and
late sixties; and when the riots occurred, they were
generally triggered by instances of police misconduct
occasioned by the use of these tactics.

What is dangerous about the broad, undiscriminating
enforcement actions is that they often ensnare perfectly
innocent citizens as well as those who torment the

community. The police way underestimate the devasting impact
that such actions have on the attitudes of those in the
community whom they are relying on to support them. In a
short time, such tactics can turn a community that was
initially enthusiastice about a more aggressive police
response into one that is hostile to it.

Such tactics may also invite judicial intervention
which has only minimal effects on the operations of the
police, but would have devastating effects on an already
dangerous political situation.

The guarded interactions, occasioned by police
fears, also eat away at the climate of trust and
understanding that should characterize the relationship
between the police and the community. And, while the police
capacity to use force and make arrests in accurate and
discriminating ways have much improved, police operations
are still (and forever) vulnerable to errors.

The consequence of all this is that when the police
arrest the wrong person, or shoot someone in ambiguous
circumstances, they may find that they have so exhausted
their credibility that they can no longer convince the
community of what may well be the truth: namely, that the
incidents were well intentioned mistakes rather than

reflections of viciousness or reckless indifference.
Instead, the older perceptions of the police, now lying just
beneath the surface, will resurface. Against the backdrop of
"provocative" police tactics, the problem facing the
minority community can easily be re-defined from an epidemic
of violence that is killing young black men and cutting the
heart out of the community, to the unjust oppression of the
community by a racist police force. The police remain an
easy mark for rhetoric that makes them the scapegoats for
the violence that currently besets urban communities.

IV. An Historic Opportunity: Community Problem-Solving and
Urban Violence

Clearly, there is a potential for operational
disasters and political misunderstandings in confronting the
epidemic of violence among young black men. That potential
lies in failing to go beyond traditional police perceptions
and responses in dealing with the problem. It also lies in
imagining that the growing demands from the black community
for more effective policing politically legitimate the
practices of the past. And it lies in thinking that simply
because these programs are initiated and implemented by
black police officials that their quality and acceptability
will be improved.

Nonetheless, we also believe that the current situation, volatile as it is, also represents an historic opportunity for the police to overcome a century of mistrust between them and the African American community. That opportunity lies in the connection that can be made between the demands and needs of the black community, and the improved capacity of the police to respond to those demands.

Afflicted by an urgent problem, the black community as a whole yearns for an effective police response more strongly than ever. That is as true for those elements of the community that rhetorically attack the police or seek to do the job that the police themselves should be doing, as for those that are more obviously police supporters. What unites them is their desire for an improved police response. The only thing that divides them is their degree of optimism that such a response could be forthcoming. Obviously, there is an opportunity for the police to show the pessimists that they are wrong.

Frustrated by the limitations of their traditional methods, and more open to the idea of community partnerships as an important element of effective policing, the police community may finally be inclined and able to enter into an effective working partnership with the minority community.

As the principles of problem-solving and community policing take hold, it will become far more natural for the police to seek better information about the causes and circumstances of the violence than they now have, and to develop more imaginative and differentiated operational responses.[18] It will also be far more natural for them to see the importance of working partnerships to politically legitimate and tactically guide their operations.

If the principles of problem-solving and community policing are applied in the design and execution of police tactics against violence, it may become possible for police officers and executives to truly connect with the minority community that have always longed for the security that could be provided by an effective and responsive police department. The partnership so created would finally end the alienation of the minority community from the police, and lay the basis for a continuing partnership that could deal with future problems more effectively than the police can now do.

A. Problem-Solving Diagnoses

Ideally, the epidemic of violence would be an occasion for serious "problem-solving" efforts. The first

18 General discussions of community policing and problem-solving policing.

step should be a detailed examination of the homicides and

aggravated assaults that had occurred in their cities over

the last half decade.[19] To make the work credible, it might

be important to include representatives of the black

community on the study team. It might also be important to

include other agencies such as hospitals and schools that

have information about violence that is not reported to the

police. In all likelihood, the police could get some help in

conducting these analyses from public health researchers who

have recently focused a great deal of attention on the

epidemiology of violence.[20]

The study group so constituted could look

particularly at homicides and assaults that involved young,

black men as victims or offenders. Or, they could focus on

those events in which the victims were innocent bystanders,

or the unlucky targets of expressive violence. The goal of

the analysis would be to confirm the existence of the

apparent trend toward increasing violence, and to determine

its significance. More importantly, they might learn more

than they now know about the relationships or situations

that occasioned violence. This analysis, in turn, might give

clues about what sorts of interventions could be expected to

deal with what particular components of the violence

problem. More targeted, and more preventative responses

19 Goldstein, Problem-Solving. See also, Spelman and Eck,
Problem solving in Newport News
20 Public Health approaches to violence. Blue Book

might suddenly look feasible.

For example, the detailed analyses recommended by problem solving may show that the wave of violence is not a single overwhelming problem caused by a broad class of people, but is instead the result of several different discrete problems, each of which may be attacked in a particular way. The casual violence among teenagers might be handled by teaching young men to find less violent ways of settling disputes, or expressing power and competence.[21] The gang violence may be controlled by improved recreational and employment opportunities, or even through recognition and use of the gang in community activities. The drug violence may be ended by a variety of tactics that neighborhoods are finding successful in dealing with drug dealers -- such as setting reclaiming streets from drug dealers block by block as is being done by Miami's Quad Program, or simply organizing citizens to set up lawn chairs and sit next to the drug dealers until they go away as has down in Richmond, Virginia.[22]

Unfortunately, my impression is that relatively little of this problem-solving analysis is now being done. The field as a whole, and each afflicted city in particular, seems to lack detailed, differentiated, data based accounts

21 Protthrow Stith, Deadly Consequences
22 References to TAmpa's QUAD program and Orange Hats of Fairlawn

of what circumstances are fueling the epidemic of violence.
Instead, we have been content to accept broader
characterizations of the problem: that the violence is
linked to drugs, or to guns, or to gangs of teenagers. As
suggested above, such characterizations are potentially
useful, for, if accurate, they do point towards some
potentially useful interventions. But these
characterizations must be refined analytically, checked
empirically, and their operational implications worked out
if they are to be of any use in guiding police and other
interventions to deal with the problem.

B. Recognizing the Political Dimension

The police imagination is limited not only by the
lack of close epidemiolocial analyses of the sources and
character of the current epidemic of violence, but also by
police reluctance to focus on the fact that the epidemic
seems primarily to affect young black men. Whether the
police like it or not, this fact establishes a racial
component, and for that reason, an important political
component, to everything that the police do in response.
Even if the police response is entirely free of racial bias,
their actions will be reviewed and interpreted by others in
terms of what they indicate about police attitudes toward
racial minorities, and young black men in particular. And

police executives, even if free of racial bias themselves,
cannot be sure that their organization's are entirely free
of racial bias. After all, it has long been obvious that the
police cannot be much better than the rest of the population
in terms of their racial biases. (Walker, 1980)

There are, of course, two responses the police could
make to the epidemic once it becomes clear that it is
concentrated among young black men that would be racist and
perceived as such. One is to ignore the problem because
neither victims nor offenders were judged worth saving. The
other is to use broad fears in the wider community as an
occasion for cracking down on a population that challenges
and dismays the police. Indeed, it is precisely these
responses that many elements of the Afro-American community
fear.

There are other responses that the police could make
which would not necessarily be racist, but would nonetheless
still be missing a crucial feature of the problem from the
point of the view of the minority community. These include a
technical, law enforcement response such as the
establishment of curfews, and more aggressive patrolling; or
a determined response to eliminate drugs and gangs or to get
guns off the street. Such efforts may well be an important
part of the police response to violence. But, if they are

carried out in a way that focuses the brunt of the police
efforts on black citizens without prior consultation with
the communities in which the operations were conducted, if
many innocent minority citizens are arrested as a result,
and if they produce a huge number of arrests which result in
either nothing or jail without much hope of rehabilitation,
then such efforts may be interpreted as nothing more than
the racist responses described above.

What the minority community (and to some degree,
other elements of the broader community) would like to see
acknowledged in the design of a police and community
response to an epidemic of violence among young black men is
one that holds out some hope for the future development of
the young men, and of the community of which they are a
crucial part. The problem must be seen not only as a
technical, law enforcement problem, but also as a deep
tragedy for the community whose future existence is being
threatened. The response must have preventive and
rehabilitative components as well as reactive and control
elements to guard against the sense that the police are
indifferent to the community's need to protect and use the
young men who are now their problem. Finally, the police and
the criminal justice system cannot be the only response that
a municipal government makes to the problem.

C. Reaching Out For Partners

These observations point up the last important weakness of conventional police thought about the current epidemic of violence: it is far too insular in its operational plans. In devising a response to violence that is both effective and politically sustainable, the police must reach out to and co-operate with others who have contributions to make. As noted above, other city agencies such as public health departments, recreation departments, schools, and employment agencies may be able to help analyze and respond to the problem. Even more importantly, the communities within which the violence is occurring, and from which both the offenders and the victims are being drawn, may able to help deal with it. They are at least interested in being consulted about the response that the police and others are planning. They may be the only ones who can effectively control it.

These observations suggest the wisdom of relying on the principles of community and problem-solving policing rather than traditional enforcement responses in dealing with the current epidemic of urban violence. The serious diagnoses of problems demanded by problem-solving policing might disclose that the problem of urban violence is really a collection of many separate and discrete problems, each

with its own solution. The emphasis given to establishing
partnerships not only with other city agencies but also with
communities by the concept of community policing also seems
essential to legitimate and effectuate strategies that can
avoid the taint of racism. (Note that both these ideas are
closely aligned with what the public health community
recommends as a public health response to the problems of
violence.)

VI. Overcoming Obstacles in Developing Partnerships

To assert the potential of such approaches is not to
deny the difficulty of devising and executing such
strategies. Indeed, one of the most stubborn problems that
police executives committed to community policing have
encountered is the difficulty of finding valuable partners
in minority communities. An important question is why is
this so.

One answer is simply that there is no one in the
minority community who wants to talk to the police.
Embittered by past disappointments, and fearful of future
actions, many minority citizens who feel responsible for the
moral lives of their communities may simply despair of being
able to talk to the police. That may be less true now as the
minority communities feel more urgently that they need help

from the police, and as the police have gradually learned the importance of developing and maintaining these relationships, but it cannot be discounted at the outset.

A second answer, far sadder than the first, is that it is hard for the police to find partners because there is no-one in the most hard-pressed black communities to talk to.[23] Many in those communities have already given up. Those few that remain are stretched to the limit with other responsibilities, and focus whatever other energies they have on exploiting opportunities that, at first blush, look far more promising than making an alliance with the police.

A third answer is that the police cannot recognize the opportunities that are there. Focused and deployed as they now are, the police see mostly the bad side of the black community. The operating experience seems to confirm the initial prejudices of many police officers -- both white and black. They come to think that the community has no moral strength. The police are further confused by the strong anti-police rhetoric of many black leaders, and by the appearance of groups that seem to challenge their basic authority to police the communities. Instead of understanding the criticisms and self-defense efforts as strengths of the minority community that might provide the

[23] Some police executives have expressed this view in our meetings

basis for some partnership, they see them as threats to the stature and power of the police. The net result is to see the black community as an undifferentiated, hostile force that cannot be understood or worked with.

How great a gulf divides the black community from the police can be gauged simply by thinking about how differently the police approach the current epidemic of violence among black men from how they approach such problems as a rash of burglaries in a suburban area, or a frightening series of rapes that has prompted demands from women's groups, or the concerns of merchants about an increase in "aggressive panhandling" that has reduced their sales. In each of these cases, the police would easily and quite naturally enter into negotiations with the community that was being adversely affected, and figure out an appropriate response. Part of the response would be by the police, and part by the affected community. In contrast, in the case of violence among young black men that most profoundly affects the black community, the police find it very difficult to develop effective working relationships. Despite the problems, two devices might help in bridging the wide gulf that now exists.

et.al. discovered that getting the police out of their cars changed their attitudes toward the community, and eventually made them feel safer in the community.[26] Trojanowicz discovered a similar thing in Flint, Michigan.[27]

Here again, though, the legacy of past suspicions may create problems. Given past relations between the police and minority communities, and current atttitudes expressed by some officers, greater intimacy between the police and the community is sometimes experienced by the community as threatening and dangerous. In the past, their protection from arbitrary police action has come from remaining anonymous. To have them now find security in being known to the police requires them overcome their past mistrust, and find in the attention of the police a resource for making their communities safer, rather than an additional threat to their endangered social lives. That poses at least a transitional problem, and potentially an ultimate limit on how effective the partnerships at the working level can be.[28]

26 Kelling et.al. Newark Foot Patrol
27 Trojanowicz, Foot Patrol in Flint, Mich
28 I am indebted to Herman Goldstein for this observation.

B. Working Partnerships at the Political Level

Partnerships established at the micro-operational level will go a long way toward dealing effectively with violence and avoiding the scape-goating of police departments. But the police must also find ways of establishing partnerships at more aggregate, and more politically visible levels. The challenge at this level is finding some agreement on how the problem will be characterized and addressed. Such shared diagnosis is difficult because such discussions inevitably evoke deeply held views about society -- including, in particular, the role that race and racism play in causing the violence.

Many, perhaps most, on the police side want to downplay the significance of the broader social environment and racial discrimination in explaining the violence they encounter. They adopt this stance partly because they wish to defend the integrity and legitimacy of the institutions to which they have committed their professional lives. In addition, however, many police believe firmly in the concept of individual moral accountability. They view efforts to "explain" misconduct in terms of unjust social forces as thin efforts to rationalize moral failings. Finally, many police have been exposed to clear examples of shocking negligence, even evil in the world they police. Thus, many

police officers think it is both morally wrong and factually
inaccurate to attribute the violence to racism or the
broader social environment. They insist that everyone should
be held accountable in the same ways.

This is not universally true among police officers,
however. Increasingly, as officers have reached higher
levels of educational attainment, and as their ranks have
been filled with minorities and women, police attitudes
about the role of the social environment and racial
discrimination in causing some of the problems they
encounter have changed. Many would now admit a greater role
for these factors. But that does not change another part of
their world view which is simply that there are some people
who deserve to be locked up and punished for their
misconduct.

Many, perhaps most on the minority side take the
opposite view. Just as the police need to believe in the
fairness of the criminal justice system, they need to see
racism as at least partly to blame for the violence. Just as
the police have direct, undeniable experience with evil and
negligence, they have direct, undeniable experience with
racial bias -- both in the past and the present. Finally, by
viewing the social environment as an important contributing
factor, it becomes possible to imagine some different kinds
of interventions that hold out some hope for the future.

Again, this is not universal in the minority
community. Increasingly the minority community is talking
about the importance of instilling proper moral values, and
holding individuals accountable for their actions. Still,
that does no alter the fact that they also know they have
been the victims of racial discrimination, and that their
economic condition has been badly neglected over the past
several decades.

As long as these different sides see the causes of
the violence and the role of the criminal justice system in
such different terms, it is hard for them to establish
effective working partnerships. In joint problem-solving
discussions, positions on these fundamental questions are
taken as early indications of whether one is prepared to act
and analyze the problem in good faith. If the police do not
sense that the minority representatives are prepared to
acknowledge the responsibility of the violent individuals
for their misconduct, and want, instead to rationalize the
violence as a consequence of social injustice, they will
doubt the seriousness of the discussions. For their part, if
the minority representatives encounter police who are
determined to begin the conversation with the view that the
violence is a result of moral deficiencies in the
population, and to deny the existence of racial bias in the

society, they will refuse to enter the negotiations
seriously.

There is always the hope that, with the softening of
the positions on both sides that is now taking place, there
may be the potential for finding common cause. And that hope
should not be discounted. But if that hope fails, there is
still a way out of the impasse: each side can come to the
hard-nosed realization that they cannot succeed without the
assistance of the others, and that these different
orientations to the broad philosophical questions are a
barrier to their effective interaction. This realization
could lead to a decision on both sides to reduce the
emphasis that they place on these broad philosophic
questions, and to concentrate instead on the operational
question.

This shift in focus from the philosophical to the
operational would not come without a cost, however. If each
side simply agrees not to discuss what they think is the
most important aspect of the current problem, a great deal
of candor will be lost, and with that, some confidence that
the partnership is established on the firm ground of a
shared understanding of the problem and the objectives. As
important, if these broader philosophical discussions are
driven underground, some important truths contained in the

perceptions of each side may be lost, and with that, some important possible approaches to the problem. For example, as an operational matter, the police may be right to focus on those individuals who commit violent acts and encourage others to do so, and to find some way of reducing their influence in the community. Similarly, the community may well be right in arguing that such responses are too limited a response to the problem they face, and that other more preventive approaches based in schools, recreation departments, church groups, and voluntary community associations would also be valuable. If these points are ruled out of order or undiscussable because they are "too ideological", some important ideas may be lost.

The alternative to avoiding these issues altogether, then, is for each side to learn how to suspend their own convictions for a while, and try to see the problem from the point of view of the other. That is important even when one is engaged in direct, hard-nosed, zero-sum negotiation.[29] It must be at least as important when two parties are trying to figure out how they might effectively and jointly deal with a common problem. The burden of understanding what the world looks like to the other side may fall particularly heavily on the police since they have had less practice in seeing things from the point of view of the minority community. Of necessity, the minority community deals with the perceptions

29 Fisher and Ury, Getting to Yes

of the majority community every day, since those are the
perceptions that are everywhere expressed.[30] For their part,
the police community has less need and less opportunity for
the police to encounter and come to understand the
perceptions of the minority community, since they are more
effectively insulated from these views.

VII. Affirmative Action Within Police Departments

The efforts to develop a shared diagnosis and agreed
upon response to the problem of violence among young black
men between the police and representatives of the minority
community is complicated by the fact that a struggle
continues within police departments to achieve some degree
of representativeness in their organizations.

On one hand, the efforts to increase the
representation of ethnic minorities in police departments
might help the police to desing future operations and forge
effective working partnerships because it leavens police
departments with attitudes toward the problem that may be
more representative of the perceptions of minority
communities. Such appointments may also increase police
capabilities to recognize the strengths of the black

30I am indebted to my colleague, Robin Ely for making this
point.

communities. They might also help because success in affirmative action increases the plausibility of police claims that they are becoming increasingly responsive to community concerns.

On the other hand, affirmative action policies may exacerbate the difficulty of establishing effective working partnerships because the policies are often viewed by current officers, both black and white, as wrongheaded in the same way that the account that attributes urban violence to external social forces and racism is wrong. They deny that affirmative action policies are justified either as a response to historical injustices, or to certify the absence of current discrimination, or to improve the effectiveness of policing by widening the diversity of the department. Instead, they see the policies as politically motivated apologies for patronage. They worry that the policies will weaken rather than strengthen the professional quality of the police forces.

Police resistance to affirmative action in police departments runs parallel to their resistance to the "sociological" interpretation of violence. In both cases, they are being asked to abandon a principle of individual accountability and objective tests of merit for different principles whose only virtue is that they are more

acceptable to members of the minority community. This seems
both inaccurate and wrong, and they resist both stubbornly.

The resistance by many white officers to affirmative
action policies is, in turn, experienced by black officers
as another example of racism. It offers further
confirmation of their views that society is indifferent to
their experience and values. The overall result is to make
the question of racism and appropriate responses to it even
more undiscussable in police departments because it is about
promotions within the department as well as the character of
external police operations designed to deal with the
violence among young black men.

What the ultimate balance of these conflicting
tendencies will be remains unclear, though there are some
promising indications. Lloyd Street, a sociologist at
Cornell University who has looked closely at racial tensions
in several American police Departments has reported that the
tensions among police officers remain sharp and difficult as
long as the police department's operational response to the
problems of the African-American communities remains what it
has been in the past: inefficient and unequal; harrassing,
discriminatory, and discourteous; and unnecessarily
forceful. On the other hand, they tend to lessen -- even
disappear -- once the operational response improves in ways

that are palpable to the black community. This suggests that the most effective way to deal with racial tensions within the police department may be to improve the police response to the problems of black communities. As Herman Goldstein has pointed out, there is an important "chicken and egg" problem here: the police better tactics to be able to attract minority citizens, but they also need the minority citizens to be able to devise better tactics.[31]

It is also worth noting that compared with many institutions in the United States (including universities), the police have made great strides in opening themselves up to minorities and women.[32] Although that has sometimes come at the price of hard feelings, and the exacerbation of racial internal conflicts in the short run, it seems fairly clear that this will produce enormous operational and institutional benefits over the long run.

VIII. Towards a Resolution

The violence among young black men is a serious social problem. It is most importantly a tragedy for the African-American community. It is also a tragedy and a threat for others. Finding an effective public response is an urgent priority.

31 Goldstein, POlicing a Free Society, p.270
32 Evidence on the success of police in implementing affirmative action. Indebted to Herman Goldstein for emphasizing this point.

The police will inevitably be a part of the public
response to this problem -- often the most immediate and
visible part. An important question for police executives is
what kind of response they will make at both political and
operational levels. There will be a temptation to stay with
the traditional police response -- both rhetorically and
operationally. If they do, however, they will be continuing
a half-century of indifference to the advice that minority
communities would like to give them about how to deal more
effectively with the problem, and will leave themselves open
to operational failures.

The alternative is to rely more on the principles of
problem-solving and community policing: to learn more about
the nature of the problem they face by gathering accurate
information about levels, trends, and immediate causes; to
acknowledge the pain the minority community feels in the
face of the current tragedy and to invite them to become
part of the solution; and to manage their operations in ways
that are responsive to the information and the objectives
that come from the black community.

More particularly, police executives, assuming the
burden of leadership in developing an effective police
response to the problem of epidemic violence among young

black men, could seek to overcome the past legacy of
suspicion by committing their departments to a three-pronged
effort to reassure the minority community that the police
could be trusted to deal with at least part of the problem
that is now facing them.

First, police executives could declare that one of
the most serious crime problem they now confront is the fact
that young black men are being killed, and otherwise
sacrificed. Their task is to prevent that from happening. In
meeting that goal, they will rely partly on policing. But
because the goal of the overall response must be not only to
protect the community, but also to salvage the futures of
the young men who must become part of the solution to the
community's problems, the police cannot be the only response
to the problem. They are pledged to working with other
community groups and agencies to do whatever is necessary to
prevent future violence in the minority communities. They
are there not only to protect the rest of the society from
violent young black men, but also to protect the young black
men from one another, and, to some degree, even from their
despair.

Second, police executives could gain credibility as
protectors of the black community by taking a more
aggressive stance towards perceived attacks on the black

community. This would include making a more effective and
determined response to so-called "hate crimes." Typically,
such offenses do not look very serious in legal terms.
Throwing rocks through windows, or burning a cross on a
doorstep will be charged as minor misdemeanors. But their
effects are far more serious. They re-kindle the fears
associated with past traumas, and threaten to reverse the
enormous strides that have been made in race relations over
the last few decades. The police response should acknowledge
the seriousness of the consequences rather than the
triviality of the legal charges.

Additionally, the police should make concerted
efforts to respond to both large and small incidents of
perceived racism in the conduct of officers. Such conduct
should be treated as equally offensive to the overall goal
of police professionalism as bribery and corruption.

Third, police executives should commit themselves to
establishing satisfactory race relations within their own
departments. This should include a solid commitment to
achieving adequate representation of minorities within the
department at all ranks -- not for vindication of historical
wrongs, but as a way of improving the quality of policing.
The concept of police professionalism must include the idea
that the police are capable of winning the consent of the

citizens who are policed, and of being able to respond
reliably to the problems and concerns of local
neighborhoods. In achieving these goals of professionalism,
achieving some degree of representativeness seems
operationally useful. The police cannot succeed unless they
have represented in the police department the perceptions
and experiences of those whom they police. They cannot make
their claims of impartiality credible unless there is
tangible evidence that their organizations are unbiased, and
capable of taking seriously the views and concerns of the
community.

Initiating such a program could establish a context
that would invite a more effective partnership than now
exists in addressing the intertwined problems of urban
violence and race, and do so in a way that strengthened
rather than eroded the working relationship between the
police and poor minority communties.

More important than the declaration of such
principles, however; and more important even than the
successful execution of these detailed elements; would be a
general improvement in the quality of policing. For a half
century, the police and minority communities have agreed on
what the goals of policing in minority communities should
be: to provide efficient and equitable service to the

communities; to arrest those offenders who are tormenting the community with skill and discrimination and to subject them to effective control; to minimize harrassment and rudeness; to resist making arrests in minority communities that would not be made in other communities; and to minimize the use of excessive force. The challenge to police professionalism is to deliver on these goals, and to do so in a way that inspires the confidence and changes the perception of minority communities toward the police. Finding effective means of saving rather than condemning young black men affords an opportunity to achieve this historically significant goal.