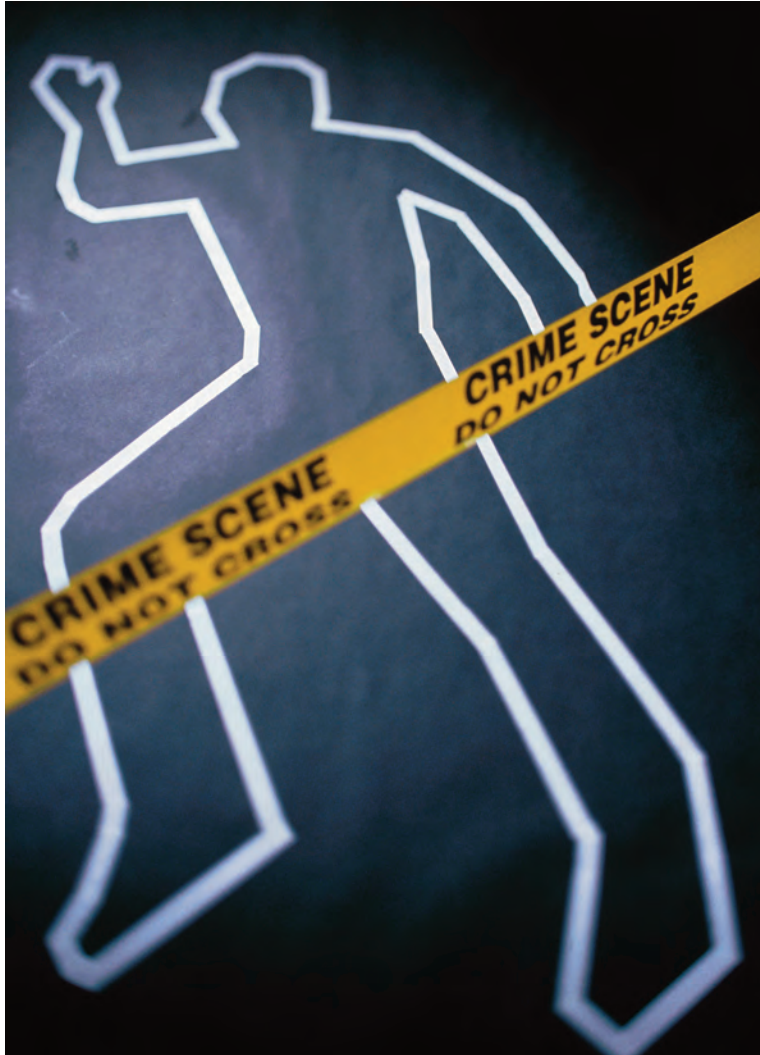


Changing the Script: A Starting Point

In the last issue of *JustSouth Quarterly*, my article, “Stop Casting Stones: The Failure of Punitive Crime Policy,” focused on what does not work in criminal policing. A key point to remember about the failure of punitive crime policy is that getting “tough on crime,” through more arrests, more incarceration, harsher sentences, and imposition of the death penalty contribute to a “vicious cycle” of violence itself.



Punitive crime policy incorrectly assumes that formal social controls, like the police and the criminal justice system, are the most important levers for controlling crime. They are not.

The most important things influencing whether or not someone commits a crime concerns whether or not s/he thinks they are doing right or wrong and whether the community that s/he belongs to thinks a particular action is right or wrong. Scholars call this “informal social control,”

and it works through both “internal” controls like conscience, internalized moral norms, etc., and “external” controls constituted by an individual’s primary relationships, including loved ones, families, friends, peers, and the community.

Contrary to what many may believe, most offenders, even the most serious, obey the law most of the time, and even most people in communities with the highest levels of crime obey the law most of the time—and desire to do so. In Los Angeles, for example, there are approximately 400 organized gangs with about 65,000 gang members in the city. A 2009 estimate shows that there were 141 gang homicides. That means that 64,859 gang members (assuming one gang member per homicide), and at least 259 gangs, did not kill anyone that year.¹

So when the press or the public assumes that “guns have become the preferred method of dispute resolution,” it does not comport with the facts. As David M. Kennedy of the National Network for Safe Communities explains, “Far more often than not, good sense prevails.”²

Note that this does not mean that gun control is unnecessary. Gun control is necessary to reinforce commonly held norms of respect, civility, and nonviolent dispute resolution.

Too often, the cycle of violence is reinforced by the “scripts” or stories that communities and law enforcement tell themselves about each other. These stories are full of assumptions that do not hold up when communities and police develop trust and address crime together.

The scripts that police and communities tell each other are wrapped up in the enduring legacy of racism in America. However, as many cities in the National Network for Safe Communities have demonstrated, it is possible to change the negative scripts and reduce crime in our cities. Upon its success in Boston, Operation Ceasefire became a feature of the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI) that was launched in 2000 in St. Louis, Atlanta, Albuquerque, and Rochester, New York, in 2000.

A common script in local communities of color is that the government is using drug laws as a tool of racial oppression. This kind of script can make a drug arrest an act of racial aggression, and going to prison becomes a badge of honor that in turn creates a norm that incarceration is a rite of adult passage.

Sadly, as David M. Kennedy finds through decades of on-the-street criminal justice research, “the streets do lie.”³ Police do use racial profiling. Police do fabricate warrants or coerce the arrested to tell lies to frame someone else. Although local communities have historical and contemporary reason to distrust the police, too often police departments “do not respect them enough even to listen and respond” to their concerns.⁴

for Reducing Gun Violence

By Alex Mikulich, Ph.D.

Conversely, the community's scripts are negatively reinforced by police who assume most people don't care about crime, are complicit in it, and therefore corrupt. People will not "snitch" when they do not have a trustful relationship with the police. Until police and local communities engage each other, listen, and work together to address crime, these scripts and their associated negative norms cannot be changed.

Operation Ceasefire, which was developed in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1996, is a primary example of how both police and local communities can positively change scripts and norms, and work together to reduce violence. Ceasefire combines problem-oriented policing with collaboration between law enforcement organizations (federal and local levels), and community stakeholders, including residents, faith-based organizations, and social services.

In Boston, Operation Ceasefire met with gangs face to face and clearly communicated to gangs that: 1) if anyone in the gang shot anyone, every gang member would receive immediate attention from law enforcement; 2) the community united publicly to express its need to stop violence; and 3) social services, job training, and employment services were

made available to every gang member who wanted to get off the streets. Ceasefire utilizes Street Workers or "violence interrupters" who diffuse conflicts before they escalate and serve as liaisons with police and social service agencies.

Operation Ceasefire demonstrated that when police directly communicate expectations and norms, compliance significantly improves. The Boston Ceasefire initiative was further "associated with a 63 percent reduction in youth homicide (ages 24 and under)."⁵

When Operation Ceasefire got off the ground in 1996, Kennedy explains, there were approximately 100 murders in Boston. By 1999, the number of murders in Boston was down to 31. Even youth gun assaults were reduced by 44 percent. Kennedy states that "no other comparable city in the country had seen such a sharp and large reduction" in the number of murders.⁶

Fear of violence motivated gang members to possess guns for self-defense or as a way to contend with trauma. As Ceasefire Street Worker teams reported, youth were so overwhelmed by trauma and Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) that sometimes gang members set themselves up to get shot. This is a symptom of PTSD.

The success of Ceasefire, a version of which is being implemented in New Orleans, is due to the fact that police and local neighborhoods came together, listened to each other, re-wrote old scripts, and learned about each other's mutual interest in reducing violence, which led to gang members giving up their guns and a reduction in violent crime.

There are many more "best practices" to be explored. For starters, Operation Ceasefire shows that the old scripts can be changed and that police and local communities can work together to reduce violence. That is change we can all believe in.

ENDNOTES

- 1 David M. Kennedy, "Practice Brief: Norms, Narratives, and Community Engagement for Crime Prevention," accessed online on May 7, 2012 at http://www.nnscommunities.org/pdf/Haas_%20practice_brief_finalwinter2010.pdf
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 David M. Kennedy, *Don't Shoot: One Man, a Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 144-145.
- 4 Ibid., *Don't Shoot*, p. 150.
- 5 Ibid., "Practice Brief."
- 6 Ibid., *Don't Shoot*, p. 75.