

NHPD Blues

Fewer cops. More crime. Community policing hits its troubled teens.

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Squad cars close off the block of Kensington Street between Chapel and Edgewood, roof lights flashing spookily in the late-November dark. Yellow tape marks out the crime scene at number 12 Kensington. Marquis "Toby" White was standing on the sidewalk in front of that small one-family house on Nov. 29 when a car pulled up and someone started shooting, critically wounding him.

Four hours later, Lt. Ray Hassett stops his police cruiser at Kensington and Chapel, across the street from the Hospital of St. Raphael, where doctors are trying to save the 22-year-old White's life.

A sedan pulls up, and two women get out. Hassett hustles over and greets one of them by name. She's wearing gold hoop earrings and pink clogs and, on this mild night, carrying her jacket under her arm.

"You all right?" Hassett asks. They talk briefly. "Hassett," she says, "you want me to call somebody for you?" He hands her his cell phone. She makes a call. Hassett comes back to his squad car.

He explains to me that a bullet is lodged in the glassed-in porch of 12 Kensington. The police need it for evidence, but no one can find the house's owner, who has recently moved. Without the owner's permission, the cops will need a search warrant to recover the bullet.

The woman in the pink clogs knows where the owner is: He's living on Park Street. She calls and tells him what Hassett needs. The owner agrees to come unlock the house. Problem solved.

Solving problems is what policing in New Haven is supposed to be all about. It's emblazoned on a banner that hangs at police headquarters: "A city of solutions." It's what Hassett himself tells me when I ask about community-based policing, the path-breaking approach that New Haven pioneered in the early 1990s: "It's got a different name now. It's problem-solving policing. We've learned that we can't do this job alone."

New Haven certainly has plenty of problems crying out for joint police-community solutions these days. After a long and dramatic drop, major crime jumped 16 percent last year. It's still climbing. And with the higher numbers have come a number of highly visible street crimes: downtown muggings in daylight or early evening hours; groups of kids on bikes, committing mischief and sometimes murderous mayhem; and guns, guns, guns.

Where are the cops?

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In the early '90s, when New Haven gained national fame for community policing, the cops were everywhere. As preached and practiced by Chief Nicholas Pastore, community policing meant forging relationships with people in every corner of New Haven: ministers and business owners, parents and school officials, Yale professors and drug dealers. It meant getting officers out of their cars and into the neighborhoods, where they got to know people and people learned to trust them (the way the woman in the pink clogs trusted Hassett). It meant a focus on preventing crime and on addressing its roots: poverty, addiction, domestic violence. It meant cops as social workers, as teen counselors, as human beings protecting other human beings — even the ones they had to arrest.

And it meant more cops, including many more female, black, Latino and openly gay officers. To end the us-against-them dynamic of white men occupying black and Latino neighborhoods, the department (not the "force," Pastore insisted) had to look like the community it served.

New Haven became safer. People felt safer. Partly as a result, the city's hopes brightened after a bleak period of fear, blight and flight.

Now, nearly 16 years into community policing, the momentum has stalled. Starting with just 382 sworn officers in 1990, the department posted big gains but then dropped again to 422 sworn officers as of Oct. 31, down by 25 cops since 2000. The percentage of black and female officers is stagnant. Fewer cops have walking beats. Pastore's successor, Mel Wearing, and current chief Francisco Ortiz have spread the regular community patrols even thinner by carving out special roving units that target crime hot spots.

One such hot zone is Dwight, which has seen the worst of New Haven's turn for the worse.

When Toby White was gunned down at 5:30 p.m., for instance, it was the city's third (and most serious) shooting of the day, and it wasn't even dinnertime yet. Cops flooded the area in hopes of preventing retaliatory violence.

But the next morning, after White died at St. Raphael's, another young man got shot in retaliation, police say. Altogether, New Haven saw four shootings in 32 hours — all related, police say, to a feud between the Dwight-Kensington area and the Hill neighborhood.

So where is the community-based policing?

The cops do seem to be everywhere. Ray Hassett, Dwight's district manager, does seem to know just about everyone. Yet some Dwight residents say the cops don't know the good kids from the troublemakers. Some kids say they worry both about neighborhood violence and about police harassment.

And the cops seem almost helpless to prevent the alarming spread of crime. Even Lt. Ray Hassett, Superman.

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Well, not Superman himself. Rather, Hassett played "Officer 2" — whom Lex Luthor shoved in front of a train at Grand Central Station — in the 1978 Christopher Reeve movie. He also played cops in *Ragtime* and *Body Double*. As a "rebel officer" in *The Empire Strikes Back*, he delivered the memorable line, "Your tauntaun will freeze before you reach the third marker."

All those roles came during Hassett's career as a professional actor, before he came to New Haven and became a real cop. He talks animatedly about his acting days, but emphasizes that he keeps it separate from his police work. He's a real cop, with 19 years on the job, 10 of them in Dwight.

Still, if you called central casting and asked for a tough white cop in black neighborhood, you might end up with Hassett.

His head is shaved except for a Marine-style oval of brush-cut gray-white hair on top. His walrus mustache resembles those of early-20th-century officers whose portraits hang at police headquarters. His blue eyes blaze under arched brows. A beaked nose adds to the fierce look.

Last summer, as police struggled to get a handle on the marauding kids on bikes in Dwight, the *Register* ran a stunning front-page photo of Hassett talking to a young black boy. Hassett looked commanding, forbidding even. The boy's eyes were cast down. You could only guess what he was feeling: Anger? Fear? Embarrassment? It's no surprise that the lieutenant's nickname — which he says bothers him "not at all" — is "Hassle."

But that's not the only facet of Hassett. He's smart, educated and funny. In the mid-'70s, before his movie career, he lived in London and worked as half of an improv comedy duo called *Sal's Meat Market*. (His partner was another unknown actor, John Ratzenberger, who later played Cliff on *Cheers*.) He's tickled by my line about central casting. During a break at the scene of the Kensington Street shooting, he quotes from Wallace Stevens' poem "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

A little earlier, while driving down George Street en route to finding the owner of 12 Kensington, Hassett observes: "This is a harsh world out here in the street. You want to survive, you've got to get along with people."

By some accounts, Hassett is an exemplar of community policing. "Ray Hassett is a remarkable problem-solver," says his boss, Chief Ortiz. "He brings people together. He is the mentor and the change agent for that community." Greg Smith, an African-American parent who works with the police to try to make Dwight safer, calls Hassett "my buddy. He's tough. Tough guy. He's fair. He's doing his job," keeping kids alive.

An evening on patrol with Hassett demonstrates that he does, indeed, know the community he

polices.

It's been a very bad day for New Haven. Kensington Street in particular has gotten crazy. Still, it's nowhere near the bad old days of Kensington Street International, or KSI. That was the early-'90s drug gang that preferred to do business in the dark, so its members used to shoot out the streetlights (and shoot at the repairmen) until UI gave up on fixing them. Neighborhood children used to sleep on the floor or in bathtubs to avoid the bullets that could come through their windows and walls any night.

Tonight, after the Toby White shooting, the neighborhood is quiet. That's usually the case for a few hours after somebody gets shot, Hassett says.

He's supervising three districts tonight, but we spend most of our time in Dwight, for obvious reasons. When I ask how community policing differs from the traditional paramilitary approach in which he was initially trained, he tells me about Batter Terrace.

That's a short, one-block street that curves from George Street to Derby Avenue, near St. Raphael's. This summer, Hassett says, it was a mess: gunfire, drug dealing, public drinking, litter, "the whole menu."

His cops made a bunch of drug arrests. But that's not all. They worked with the new owners of an apartment building to improve the lighting, evict problem tenants, put up no trespassing signs that give police more legal authority to arrest hangers-out. "We took a look at it and said, 'What on this street is making it attractive to criminals?'" Hassett recounts. "Back in the day you would not have asked about how something looks."

Community policing, he says, poses the question: "'OK, we need to arrest these people. What else needs to be done?' That's what's new — the 'what else?'"

Actually, Nick Pastore, the chief who brought community policing to New Haven, had a very different idea about arresting people. A product of old-school policing, whose success was measured by numbers of arrests, Pastore helped secretly wiretap political radicals in the '60s. Then he converted to the gospel of community policing. As chief from 1990 to 1997, he argued that while arrests were sometimes necessary, they were a last resort — a failure, even. The goal is to keep people from committing crimes. Pastore believed that, in most instances, police should be able to accomplish that goal without locking anyone up.

That was a radical change for a tough-guy department that was, in 1990, 76 percent white men and was known for its beat-down tactics in poor neighborhoods of color.

Some of community policing's successes were small: A cop noticed kids jumping on filthy old mattresses in the Hill and got them a trampoline instead. Some successes were big: The Yale Child Study Center, in partnership with the NHPD, has provided help and counseling to hundreds of kids who have witnessed violence in their homes or on the streets.

Many cops resisted the new approach. They derided it as namby-pamby, nursemaid stuff that real

cops wouldn't be caught dead doing. Much of the old guard moved on. But change happens slowly, if at all. And sometimes it reverses direction.

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Hassett doesn't arrest anyone the night I ride with him. Not even close.

We're way out on Whalley Avenue, near Tommy K's, when Hassett spots a man staggering and then leaning against a phone pole. Hassett pulls over and takes out his cell phone: "I think we're going to need a detox." Then he turns his car around and zooms up right next to the wobbly guy. He opens his window.

"Kevin!"

I'm startled. He knows this guy? Hassett gets out of the car and approaches the guy in a friendly way. "How you doing? How much did you have to drink tonight?" He helps him sit down on a low stone wall. They chat. Kevin, a fiftyish black man in camouflage pants and black boots, one of which has the toe ripped off, says it's his mother's birthday. He bought her some makeup, which he shows Hassett. Then he turns to me and says of Hassett, "He cleaned up Batter Terrace!"

Now I'm really surprised. "Do you live over there?" I ask. "I've got kids living over there," Kevin responds. "How are they doing?" I ask. He replies: "Better since Hassett cleaned up the place!"

Hassett stays with Kevin until the firefighters and EMTs arrive. "We saw you last night," one of the firefighters exclaims. "This is getting to be a habit, bro!" But Kevin doesn't want to go to the hospital. Hassett calmly tells him he needs to go.

Kevin still doesn't want to go, and while there's no overt conflict yet, the situation could escalate.

Then a woman shows up, wearing a long coat and wool hat. Turns out she's Kevin's mom. She tells him, more emphatically than Hassett, that he needs to go to the hospital. "They're helping you," she says. "You're intoxicated — and you're sick! Go with them! Do you realize they could've arrested you? Go!"

Before Kevin gets into the ambulance, the firefighters pat him down and find a pint bottle in his pocket. They also find the makeup he bought for his mother's birthday.

In the squad car, I ask Hassett how he knows Kevin.

"Batter Terrace," he replies.

"But he said he doesn't live there."

"He used to live there. He got evicted." And yet Kevin has offered unsolicited praise for Hassett's efforts to clean the place up. Later, at Chapel and Kensington, a tipsy-looking man walks by, sees

Hassett sitting in his car, and stops to demand: "What, Hassle? What? What!" Hassett just grins.

When detectives arrive on Kensington to interview people who witnessed the shooting, Hassett makes the introductions. He knows everyone.

Almost everyone. He doesn't know Toby White, the shooting victim, although he says his face was familiar. He tells me that while White spent a lot of time in the neighborhood, he didn't live there. In fact, he lived three short blocks away on Chapel Street.

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"You can't even walk down the street without the police bothering you," complains Greg. "Just wearing this or this" — he motions to his friend Jeff, in a black hoodie, knit cap and dog tags, and then to his own dark gray hoodie — "they'll stop us."

Greg is a 15-year-old freshman at Hillhouse High. Jeff, a tall, thoughtful-seeming 16-year-old, also goes to Hillhouse. With a third friend, 15-year-old James, and Greg's dad, we're sitting at Cosi on Elm Street.

Over a couple of pizzas, the boys tell me about their experience with the cops. All three say they try to mind their own business and stay out of trouble. But, they contend, the police don't know who's who in the neighborhood.

"They see a certain amount of kids doing bad things in the Dwight area, they think it's everybody," James says. "They jump to conclusions extremely fast."

Greg tells of standing on a corner with a group of kids. A police car rolled by. The kids remained, talking. When the cops came back, they said, "'That was your signal to move,'" Greg recalls. "So they put us all up against the wall and searched us."

"I stay inside," Jeff says. "They just randomly pick on somebody, just to think they're doing something."

Turns out Jeff does know Hassett a little bit.

"My mother asked Mr. Hassett to talk to me and keep an eye on me," he admits. "I was giving her some trouble": not doing his schoolwork, acting disrespectfully. Jeff also volunteers the view that Dwight kids need the police. Otherwise, "somebody would get stabbed."

"You need 'em," he says, "but you don't like 'em. You can't live without 'em."

Greg's father, Greg Smith, thinks it's primarily parents' responsibility to keep their kids out of trouble. Over the summer, he started a parents' patrol — mostly by himself — in the evenings. He walks around, talks to kids, tries to get to know them and something about their families. When he sees police interacting with kids, he tries to "mediate. 'I tell them, the police aren't harassing you. They're keeping you safe.'" He says Hassett and his officers "are doing an

excellent job."

Still, Smith thinks the cops could do more. While Hassett knows the neighbors, other cops don't, he says.

"Some of the police need to work on their human relations skills. They're out there. But it's not enough just to walk the beat. You've got to talk to people. I think there could be a lot more involvement, just in terms of talking to the kids. I think it would solve a lot of crimes. Or you could get preventative information. If people don't know you, they don't want to tell you anything."

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True community policing prevents crime not just by gathering information about who's planning what. It prevents crime by improving people's lives.

Kay Codish and Shafiq Abdussabur both make that point in separate interviews. Codish has run the department's training academy since 1992. She's a civilian with a background in theater and social activism — about as far from traditional policing as you can get. Abdussabur is an officer assigned to Dixwell, where he grew up. He's president of the New Haven Guardians, a new organization of black cops. (He brings some baggage to the post: In 1999 Abdussabur gave a gun to his brother, who used it to kill somebody. Later, Abdussabur was fired for shooting out the tires of a car that ran a sobriety roadblock, but the state labor board reinstated him.)

Pastore personally recruited both Codish and Abdussabur to the department. He met Abdussabur at a local Muslim protest against police failures in a drug-infested neighborhood, and challenged him to join the police. Both are devotees of Pastore's approach to community policing.

"Community policing is incredibly labor-intensive, which equals money," Codish says. "And there's no money."

Indeed, the police department's budget dropped in fiscal year 2003 and again in '04. The current budget of \$31.7 million is just above the 2002 level, representing a substantial cut in real dollars. Much of the decline happened because the federal government ended its commitment to funding community policing. "I think that the tone has changed," says Abdussabur. "A lot of this 'get tough on crime' has turned into a containment approach. I don't think it really leaves officers enough time to formulate personal strategies and interpersonal skills. When you're constantly just responding to a 911 call, it doesn't leave you time for, 'Hey, what's going on, guys?' It puts an enormous amount of pressure on the average officer to be both the enforcer and the negotiator."

Codish and Abdussabur both believe fervently in the power of social programs to prevent crime. Codish talks about bringing cops together with kids who were in trouble with the law to make videos. "After we've worked with them, they don't shoot each other," she says. "Because they learned respect. They learned trust."

To hear Codish and Hassett each talk about the kids on bikes who terrorized Dwight last summer

is to hear the gap in their views of what community policing is all about.

"You have to find the ones who are doing the assaults and you have to arrest them and take them out of circulation," Hassett says. "I think the juvenile court system needs to take another look and not underestimate" the seriousness of these crimes.

Codish sees locking kids up as counterproductive. "This may sound naïve," she says, "but I think if we could direct a lot of that excess energy," police could steer the kids away from trouble. She acknowledges that her approach of "let's get the cops and kids together and put on a play or write poetry" sounds weird. But, she insists, "that's community policing" — not feel-good community relations fluff for when time and money permit, but the core of a more humane and effective approach.

Abdussabur has another critique: The department has lost momentum in reflecting the people it's supposed to serve. He points to the stagnant percentage of black and female officers. He says retaining officers of color is hard because they're judged more harshly than whites. He says too many cops still live outside New Haven, which makes it harder for them to feel comfortable in city neighborhoods or to have the city's best interests at heart.

Michael Jefferson echoes that last criticism. An African-American lawyer and activist, he's never been a fan of the NHPD. Though he never trusted Pastore, he thinks the chief did try to move the department in a good direction. But he thinks the progress was small to begin with and that it halted when Pastore left in 1997.

"We should be experiencing the fruits of community policing now," Jefferson says. Instead, "there's even more distance between the police and the community. You hear it in the distrust of our young people. You can hear it in the middle class: 'Keep the police out of your life unless you absolutely need them.'"

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Back in Dwight, Ray Hassett says that making personal contacts is "the essence of my job." Yet when I tell him about how Greg, James and Jeff say the cops don't know them, he doesn't exactly deny it.

"You have to look at the individual officer. Getting out there and getting to know everybody — for some people that comes naturally. You can't order somebody to go do that." He says he encourages officers to do it when they have time. But if getting to know people is the essence of Hassett's job as district manager, why isn't it also essential for the cops he manages?

I ask that question of Cisco Ortiz, who worked his way up through the ranks to become chief in 2003. In an hour-plus interview, the chief is sometimes eloquent, sometimes a bit windy, always friendly. He proclaims his firm commitment to community policing — and, he adds in a bit of political puffery, the mayor's commitment — and to developing "partnerships" to "solve problems." He opines that "cops and kids naturally gravitate toward each other." But when I ask about new initiatives, he doesn't talk about getting cops and kids together. He talks about

technology improvements and special crime-suppression and crime-reduction units that move uniformed cops from hot zone to hot zone, instead of anchoring them on neighborhood beats.

I tell him about the kids in Dwight who assert that the cops don't know them because they don't go out and talk to people.

First Ortiz quotes Sir Robert Peel, creator of the modern English police force, to the effect that the constant presence of police is a sign of failure.

"It's a fair observation," he says of the kids' claim. "I believe otherwise, but if that's what these kids believe, we've got to do better."

But when I press him — if getting to know people is the essence of Hasset's job, then why isn't everyone doing it? — Ortiz launches into a smiling, low-key tirade.

Of course New Haven cops are committed to the community, he says. They raise money, toys, coats and turkeys for charity. They attend weddings and baptisms. "So I beg to differ.

"Talk to 120,000 people," he says. "Go into the schools. You going to talk to them or to the kid who escaped on murder charges? I don't know."

Policing, Ortiz concludes, is a dangerous, thankless job. Cops go out every day and put their lives on the line. "More often than not, they get kicked to the curb."

Community policing, or community vs. police? Scratch the chief and it starts to sound like us against them all over again.

It can feel that way when crime rises so noticeably. Major crime posted hefty increases in every category except rape last year. The 2005 numbers are even worse, although still less than half of their appalling 1990 levels. By the end of this November, the number of non-fatal shootings was up 25 percent over the 2004 total.

Nationwide, by contrast, major crime continued to decrease in 2004.

In a city so divided by race, by poverty vs. privilege, by town vs. gown, conversation about crime quickly skews toward the plight of Yalies and the white middle class. Is it safe to shop or eat downtown? Can students go jogging or walk to their off-campus apartments? Clearly, street crime hits the people who live in poor neighborhoods the hardest, and most of those people are neither white nor middle-class.

But, to a large extent, we New Haveners are all in this together. Dangerous neighborhoods make daily life less secure for people in "safe" neighborhoods. Perceptions of a crime-ridden downtown make the Green less hospitable for everyone, from middle-aged white professionals to black kids waiting for the bus. New Haven is in many ways a city of "us" and "them." But us against them quickly becomes, in reality, us against us.

In his gubernatorial stump speech, Mayor John DeStefano talks about two traumatic New Haven crimes. One was the mugging and fatal stabbing of Yale undergraduate Christian Prince on stately, serene Hillhouse Avenue in 1991. DeStefano pinpoints Prince's death — and the national publicity that portrayed Yale as a dangerous campus — as a turning point in the university's relationship with New Haven. Yale started to recognize, he says, that its health depended on that of the city around it, and started to invest in change.

The other death was that of 7-month-old Danielle Taft in 1994. A drug dealer shot through a window into Danielle's living room, paralyzing her grandmother and killing Danielle. DeStefano describes her funeral, just six weeks after he became mayor, and his determination to make New Haven a place where babies don't get shot in their living rooms. He describes the New Haven of today as a very different place from the city in which Danielle died: a place of hope and dignity.

What DeStefano doesn't say is that we're in danger of turning back in the other direction. Hard work and commitment, as well as some good luck, brought us this far. Mere hope will not move us forward.