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Two days before Christmas 1999, three young women, said by the police to be involved in drug traffic, were found dead at 4:30 a.m. in Jardim Herculano, a favela (squatter settlement) at the southern edge of São Paulo. They were found in a garbage dump called Vera Cruz, often used by killers to dispose of corpses. All three women – Elena de Oliveira Franca (33), Fabiana dos Reis Bras (19) and Renata Aparecida Camargo (18) – were nude and had deep bruises on their breasts. The police concluded that they had been beaten with a car jack and then killed execution-style with a gunshot to the back of the head. They had been seized by three hooded men in front of Elena’s house at 3 a.m. and were forced into a car. Relatives said the girls were threatened the week before and that the killers showed up at their house on four occasions looking for them. Two cars – a gray Fiat Palio and blue Ford Fiesta – were found less than a kilometer away from the garbage dump, both with false license plates. The Palio’s doors were covered with blood stains. Police said that one of the killers was identified, but no arrests were made.

There are few social problems as alarming as an epidemic of homicides. In Greater São Paulo, the world’s third-largest metropolis with 17 million people, 9,027 murders were reported in 1999, against 667 in New York City, with seven million people, where intensive police action was able to reduce the number of homicides from its peak of 2,246 at the height of the crack epidemic in 1990. There were roughly as many homicides in São Paulo in 1999 as deaths caused by the war in Kosovo. Since 1984, when reliable crime statistics first became available, the number of murders in Greater São Paulo surged by 157% while population rose by only 29%. Of the 9,027 murders recorded in São Paulo in 1999, many were linked to surges of other forms of crime, especially narcotics traffic, armed robbery and automobile theft. Since 1984, according to police statistics, armed robberies increased by 166% and car thefts by 253%. Only 1.7% of murders of children and adolescents in Greater São Paulo over several years led to conviction and imprisonment.

Why are there so many murders in Greater São Paulo? What can be done to reduce them? The Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics hopes to address these questions with its program of research and public debate on violence and public security. This is a preliminary inquiry seeking to create a framework for future research. To penetrate the reality behind the numbers, more than 300 homicides in the southern and eastern periphery of São Paulo in 1999 were analyzed. These two regions account for nearly two-thirds of all homicides in São Paulo. Police officials and detectives, social scientists and residents of afflicted neighborhoods were interviewed. My understanding was strengthened by a series of interviews with 12 professional killers for

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a report I did on multiple homicides (chacinas) for Veja magazine (September 8, 1999).

These crimes are signs of social disorder and institutional weakness that pose the main threat to public safety in the metropolis. Most of the killings occurred in outlying neighborhoods like Jardim Miriam, whose parish priest, Father Jose Dillon, conducted 171 memorial masses in 1999 alone. Of these, 26 were for murdered adolescents. Anyone can become a victim: thieves, drug-dealers, addicts, housemaids, carpenters, wives and even babies. Their stories get scant media coverage. People stumble upon corpses covered with newspapers or plastic sheeting in the middle of the street at dawn. The murders become part of the neighborhood routine.

One morning in Jardim Miriam Father Dillon went to back his car out of the garage. When he opened the door he found a dead man in front of the garage. In his rush to leave, Father Dillon couldn’t help but think: “Why did this guy have to die in front of my house? The police won’t get the body out of here for hours and I’ll be late.” He then was shocked by his reaction. The routine of murders made him used to seeing corpses in the street.

Stories of murders in the São Paulo periphery can be very similar. Someone is having a drink in a bar, walking down the street or just relaxing at home, when one or more killers appear, open Fire and calmly vanish. The motives can vary, but most are trivial. Most of these killings have one thing in common; the victims were marked for murder. They were executed. Of 143 murders analyzed by the Nucleus of Violence Studies at the University of São Paulo – all in the city’s southern periphery in 1995 – only 30% were committed by a single individual. In the remaining 70%, between two and 10 killers were involved, suggesting that in most cases some conspiring took place before the execution.

Execution is a most cruel form of homicide. There are no regrets. Not only do the killers murder in cold blood, they justify it. A shocking lesson from my 11 hours of talks with killers from the São Paulo periphery was the casual way in which they insisted that they only kill people who deserve to die. Dozens of execution-style murders were justified by a code under which killers live and die. Fumaça ("smoke" in Portuguese), one of them, explains: "You can’t feel sorry for killing someone who deserves to die." Though he refused to say how many people he had killed, Fumaça nodded in agreement when asked if they were more than 50. “If you count all the times I went on rides with others, it’s definitely more. But I’m proud of the fact that I’ve never killed an innocent person.”

**Problems of Scale**

Greater São Paulo today suffers from colossal problems of scale. The metropolis grew from 31,000 inhabitants in 1870 to 17 million today, spread over 8,000 square kilometers, the fastest long-term rate of urban growth in human experience. Greater São Paulo embraces 39 municipalities, the largest of which is the municipality of São Paulo, the state capital, with 10 million inhabitants. Not enough has been invested in physical and human resources to manage these problems of scale. There are signs of progress, but institutions are weak and precarious.

Greater São Paulo’s homicide rate, 54 per 100,000 population, is only the fourth-highest among Brazil’s metropolitan areas after Vitória (84), Recife (62) and Rio de Janeiro (59). The surge of violence in São Paulo brought its homicide rate above those of violent U.S. cities such as Detroit (43), New Orleans (49) and Washington (49) and St. Louis (69). But it remained much less than in other disturbed cities like Cali, Colombia (91) and Johannesburg, South Africa (115). Poverty scars most big cities of the world, but levels of violence seem to
be shaped by the strength of social organization and public institutions.

In recent decades, São Paulo’s growth slowed, with the population of some older neighborhoods even shrinking. But peripheral communities are growing fast. The southern region of Greater São Paulo alone houses more than three million people, roughly the same population as cities like Miami and Atlanta. In the fast-growing community of Capão Redondo, where 200,000 people now live, Maria da Fátima da Costa, a schoolteacher from the Northeast, says “the visual aspect is improving. It was horrible before. Now we have shops selling baby clothes, flowers and cosmetics. We even have automatic cash machines. We can’t allow, ourselves to be called bandits and burns because most people here work hard and want to live decent lives and raise their kids decently.”

Those living in the better neighborhoods of São Paulo rarely go to the periphery. They get nearly all their information about these marginal areas from crime news in the press and on television. They have no idea of the tangle of progress and violence being woven into the daily lives of these communities as a patchwork of modest owner-built houses on lots purchased legally from developers and favelas that arise in invaded areas. There seems to be a difference in levels of violence between the two kinds of settlement.

These mixed communities emerge suddenly and spawn a life of their own. First, vacant land on hillsides and ravines is invaded and stripped of wild vegetation. Within days or weeks, shacks made of wood, cardboard, plastic sheeting and scrap metal align themselves in rows along roughly traced streets. Along new tragic corridors, jammed with cars and buses, brickyards do a feverish business, along with stores selling tools and doors, plumbing and window frames, especially on weekends, as shacks are transformed into sturdier dwellings sprouting TV antennas. Bakeries, pharmacies, electrical appliance dealers, super-markets, bank branches, car repair shops and churches appear. Most churches are storefronts, belonging to various Pentecostal sects, but some congregations build huge white tabernacles with thousands of seats. The physical infrastructure of civilization, embodying running water, electricity, telephone lines, postal service and bus routes, soon appears. Along one of the southern periphery’s main traffic arteries, a new elevated metro line is being built.

The residents of the better neighborhoods of Greater São Paulo complain most about violence. Their complaints attract the most attention of the police and the media, though these better neighborhoods record very low crime rates. In most of the world’s big cities, metropolitan crime rates hide big variations among districts. The public pays more attention to notorious crimes, like murders of young women drivers stopping at traffic lights, or killings during a robbery at a high-class bar, or the kidnap-murder of the eight-year-old son of a supermarket proprietor. In São Paulo, many wealthier neighborhoods report less than 10 homicides yearly, while in peripheral communities they number in the hundreds. It is hard to explain the surge of homicides in Greater São Paulo without referring to the proliferation of firearms in the periphery. Guns are used in roughly 90% of all homicides in Greater São Paulo. According to São Paulo’s police ombudsman, 94,000 legalized firearms fell into the hands of criminals over the past five years, adding to the 1.5 million weapons circulating in the illegal arms trade in the state, on top of 500,000 legalized weapons. This amounts to one gun for every 17 citizens of São Paulo State.

In 1997-98, 40% of all homicides in São Paulo happened on a weekend. More than 180 police reports on weekend murders were read for this survey. In São Luís cemetery, in the southern periphery, graves are dug in advance on Saturdays and Sundays. Everyone knows that there will be many burials on Mondays. In 1999, homicides between 8 p.m. Fridays and 8 a.m. Mondays jumped from an average of 50 to 80 in February, or one homicide every hour.

The poor are the main victims of violence, but their troubles surface only in shocking statistics. Many seek refuge in religion. Churchgoers often stereotype themselves intentionally, so that their affiliation is clear. They wear dress shirts buttoned to the top, avoid slang and cite the Bible, which they carry around with them. Others make sure their employment cards are up-to-date. They don’t drink and they don’t go out at night. At all cost, they must avoid being mistaken for criminals. For most families, being mixed up with crime is both a danger and a disgrace.

Bandits often live side-by-side with decent people, sometimes belonging to the same family, yet possess some defining characteristics. For one, their slang is easily recognizable. “Good blood” or “bad blood”, for example, says whether someone is trustworthy or not. An “investigation” or a correria means to take part in a crime. A “police report” or
“treta” means someone gets you in trouble with the law. A “cururu” is a fool. The more slang you use, the more people suspect that you’re on the wrong side of the law.

Endemic crime often provokes solutions outside the law. Merchants in some squatter settlements hire professional killers, called justicieros, to execute known criminals with community support. In Favela Monte Azul, in São Paulo’s Southern periphery, crime declined over the past decade. Residents say they only began to live in peace when some men in the favela organized themselves into a vigilante group to provide rough justice. According to residents, the group killed all the criminals in the area – that is, those that refused to flee – between 1989 and 1992.

What makes weekends so violent? At first glance, it may seem that parties, bars and alcohol were behind so many killings. On weekends, people tend to go out and drink more than they do during the week. Seeing that many carry guns, Fights and fatalities should increase. At closer examination, however, the reality is different.

In São Mateus, on the eastern edge of the city, 71 homicides were reported on weekends alone during, 70 days between August and October 1999. The 8th Borough Command of the Civil Police, which coordinates all nine precincts in the area, separates all police reports filed during the same period, preparing a brief summary of each. Of the 71 reports, 29 contain a brief description of the circumstances in which the crimes were committed. In four-fifths of the cases, the killer went either to a bar, a street corner, someone’s house or to a party in search of his victim. He killed and left, stealing nothing.

On Saturday, October 23, 1999, Wilson, 22, unemployed and with no criminal record, was at home when two men shouted his name from the front door. His mother went to see who it was. Two young men that she didn’t recognize asked her to get her son for them. When she turned around, both of them ran inside, shot Wilson and then fled. This pattern of execution-style murders repeats itself in the southern district of Santo Amaro. On weekends between October 1 and November 21, 105 homicides occurred. Of 31 police reports containing summaries, 25 described execution-style murders. The other six were results of armed robbery, stray bullets and barroom brawls. On November 7, a group of young men burst into a house seeking to kill the owner, who saw what was coming and fled through the backyard. So as not to waste the trip, the gang killed the owner’s wife instead.

A petty dispute brings a death sentence. A simple fist fight solves nothing. Days, weeks and months can go by, yet the victim is likely to end up paying with his life for having shown insufficient respect for the one who pulls the trigger. Weekends are the best time to locate hunted men, as most people tend to be home. Most killings in bars don’t arise from brawls. Killers are tipped off that the victim is drinking in a given bar. They load their weapons and execute him and often whoever else happens to be there.

Many police reports are not detailed enough for us to learn the motives and the circumstances of these crimes. More detailed reports require witnesses, who fear the criminals’ revenge. Nearly 60% of all homicides happen between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., leaving many bodies to be found on the street at sunrise, with no one there to explain what happened. The poorly lit streets of the periphery are mostly deserted after dark. While 42 homicide cases tiled at the São Mateus borough command lack many crucial details, they nonetheless suggest execution-style killings. Victims are literally filled with bullets, many to the head, but nobody bothers to steal their wallets.

To dig deeper into the study of these homicides, a second step was to analyze investigation reports produced by the Civil Police Homicide Division. These reports expand upon the initial police bulletins, making use of testimony given during the investigation. Though most witnesses do not supply names, they do tell what they say, and heard. To begin with, 74 investigation re-ports were read from the G South investigative team, covering São Paulo’s southern periphery. These reports document ongoing investigations of homicides committed in this area in 1999. Then 47 investigation reports were studied of homicides in the eastern periphery in 1999, produced by the C East investigative team. In both areas, of the 67 cases providing enough information to define the circumstances of the killings, 61 clearly were executions.

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between spontaneous killing and planned execution of a victim. However, overwhelming evidence from a significant sample suggests that execution-style murders play a key role in the surge of homicides in São Paulo. Information from both police reports and subsequent investigations supports this conclusion. Police officers, detectives, prosecutors and court clerks all point to execution-style shootings as the most common pattern of homicide. The principal
actors in the homicide drama are young men who impose a culture of violence on their communities. One of the main reasons given by criminologists for the decline of homicides in the United States over the past decade is the shrinkage of the number of young men in the 15-24 age group, thanks to a fall in birth rates in the 1970s and 1980s. A similar shrinkage in this age group is occurring in Greater São Paulo, but the homicide rate keeps rising. In Diadema, a suburban municipality of 350,000 people in the southern periphery of São Paulo, the number of men aged 15-24 was stationary in the early 1990s and has been falling since 1996, but Diadema's homicide rate surged from 75 per 100,000 population in 1995 to an astronomical 108 per 100,000 in 1998.

The Nucleus of Violence Studies at the University of São Paulo found that victims and killers knew each other in 88% of cases examined. The practice of killing personal enemies only adds fuel to a raging fire. One murder leads to another. Revenge and fear of revenge contribute to the vicious cycle of homicides. Wolverini, a killer I interviewed for Veja magazine, explains: “I met some guys on my block and we started playing on the same soccer team. They would go on 'hunts' [missions to kill someone sentenced to die], but I would stay home. Then a friend of ours was killed. He was a guard at a school. Some punks killed the guy, so we smoked the fools. That was my first time. I never stopped since. I know there's always someone out there that wants to kill me. Every time I put a bullet in someone, I know that others will go after me. It never ends.”

Rules of Behavior

Crack — a cheap, impure and highly addictive form of cocaine — burst onto the scene in São Paulo around 1993. Ever since, police have correlated crack with rising homicide rates. But the surge of homicides cannot be explained by the drug trade alone. While the proliferation of crack added fuel to the fire, homicides also seem to be linked to a behavioral code among young men who deal with crime and violence on a daily basis. Breaking the code often brings violent death.

The rules of behavior that the killers claim to follow are like those applied in the overcrowded prisons and youth reformatories of São Paulo. “Respect” is very important. A drug dealer who fails to kill an addict who cannot pay his debts risks being labeled as “soft” by his peers. “If I don't kill him, everyone's gonna think I'm soft because I don't collect what I'm owed,” explained a convict at São Paulo's Carandiru prison — the largest in Brazil — in the book Estação Carandiru, by Drauzio Varela. In this environment, if someone feels insulted publicly, respect can be preserved only by bloodshed. During a revolt in October 1999 at one of the Febem youth reformatories in São Paulo, when some 1,000 inmates escaped, an 18-year-old named Fabio Antonio de Castro shocked the country with his cold account of how he killed a fellow prisoner. Castro first scalped his victim’s face with a blowtorch and then chopped off both his legs and his head with a machete. In the killer’s words, the victim had threatened to “make me his woman. I don't regret it. He deserved to die and I'd do it again if I had to,” he told reporters. Castro also said his victim was an informant for the guards. “On top of it all, he never stopped flirting with everyone else’s sisters and girlfriends on visiting days,” he added. “He begged me not to kill him, but I show no pity.” In a crowded local police station Castro shares a cell with Mateus da Costa Meira, a medical student who sprayed a movie theater in an upscale shopping center with machine gun fire, killing three and wounding five other people a month after the Febem revolt.

As in life behind bars, surviving as a young man in São Paulo's periphery means walking on eggshells. You must avoid offending someone who thinks getting even means pulling a trigger. And if you do offend someone, chances are you will pay the price when you least expect it. In this environment, survival demands “good blood.” Having “good blood” means being humble and not being better than others. In such a violent world, full of people trying to deceive others, the survivor is desperate to avoid petty conflicts. The rules of the game thus seek to prevent the strong from imposing themselves on the weak. Ceara, another killer, explains: “Being tough doesn't mean much around here. A man must be humble and show respect for others. For every tough guy, there's ten more that are tougher. He who acts tough gets killed. He can talk and talk, but the same bullet that kills a punk can kill a brave man. Any Joe Nobody can kill a tough guy.”

Killers do not see themselves as being insane. While reporting on chacinas for Veja magazine, I had two long talks with eight different killers, the first of them on a Saturday morning. In contrast to the horrors they narrated, all the killers insisted that they are normal and trustworthy people. In their view, they are average men that abide by a code of behavior, killing only when they believe it...
is justified. “Once I had a date with this girl that had heard about my reputation. When we met she said she was expecting someone uglier, someone rougher,” explained Fumaça. “I’m not rough at all. I’m really a sweetie, though I do demand respect.”

In all homicide investigations, police must ask whether the victim was involved with drugs. Even without knowing the killers’ names, police presume that the crime was committed by a neighborhood drug dealer or on his orders, which often happens. On January 18, 1999, 25-year-old Juraci went to a nearby gasoline station to have a beer. Two young men pulled up on a motorcycle and ordered 70 cents worth of gas. Upon paying they asked the attendant to get them a beer. While the attendant went to the refrigerator, the two men opened fire on Juraci. No witnesses could identify the killers. During the police investigation, however, Juraci’s father said that his son used drugs regularly. To buy cocaine, he often stole valuables from home and sold them on the street. The year before, the father found our that Juraci owed money to a drug dealer and subsequently offered to pay his debt for him, on one condition: that the boy quit using drugs. The boy’s father told all because he had nothing to hide. Thus another drug-related homicide is reported, probably correctly in Juraci’s case. But not all addicts are killed by dealers.

The Nucleus of Violence Studies Found that, of all the homicide cases analyzed, 50% were the result of disputes, revenge, unpaid debts and eliminating real or potential informants. Only 12% could be related to drug tragic, other analysts say is an understatement, showing a need for more research on this issue. These numbers are much lower than police statistics, which hover around 30%. Though the study does not give the circumstances surrounding each death, analysis reports from police investigations suggests that most of these killings were planned executions. Armed robberies in which the victim was killed were a mere 6%. Traffic disputes and barroom brawls, in which the killer lost his head in moments of rage, were 15%.

Though crime bosses rarely appear in poor communities, unemployed young men of the periphery are recruited by criminal networks to do their dirty work. They sell drugs and rob trucks and cargoes as well as cars and banks. Independently of the more organized networks, informal groups also carry out armed robberies, burglaries and “lightening kidnappings” For ransom. The work of smaller, improvised groups depends on opportunities. “It’s like the fruit vendor that sells a different fruit in each season”, explained Paulista, a killer involved in truck hijackings. “If the police crack down on one thing, we do another. We go where the profits are; robbing cargoes, selling guns or kidnapping people near cash machines at banks.” These hired hands of crime networks often operate without advance knowledge of the travel route of targeted cargo. Rarely do they report directly to crime bosses. They form groups and assign tasks with partners on a word-of-mouth basis, doing odd jobs on request. They also make their own decisions and, with a wide network of contacts, deal with their own internal conflicts.

Gang members often kill each other. Most live and die by their own code. According to the São Paulo Civil Police, 99% of all homicides are committed by men. Statistics compiled by the 6th Borough Command revealed that one in three murders in the district of Santo Amaro, between January 1998 and May 1999, were committed by men who had killed before. Nearly half of them had criminal records for offenses such as armed robbery, possession of stolen goods and drug trafficking. But this should not imply that the other half were upright citizens. In Brazil, criminal records can only be kept on those 18 years of age or older. According to the 6th Borough Command, 40% of suspects involved in investigated homicides were under 23 years of age. Many killings are not investigated. Just how many juvenile offenders not yet caught committing a crime as an adult cannot be estimated.

Killers in the São Paulo periphery can be classified into three types. The First are known as justiceiros, professionals hired to kill. They often begin as hired guns to rid a neighborhood of local thugs. As their Fame grows, they get contracts from surrounding areas. In the second class are common criminals – both on and off the payroll of organized crime – that kill when threatened. Finally, there are drug dealers. Their main victims are addicts who owe money, though they also kill over territorial disputes.

This is not to say that all homicides in São Paulo fall into these three categories. In 1999, the police killed 438 civilians in São Paulo State, compared with 19 deaths of civilians at the hands of the New York City police, including the killing of Amadeu Diallo in the Bronx that provoked wide-spread public indignation. Many civilians in São Paulo kill without prior involvement in crime, often in self-defense or in defense of someone else. Or in a moment of rage. But the first three categories describe men for whom killing is a way of earning a living or solving
problems, however small. Some are killed by mistake because the killer received faulty information upon whom he was supposed to murder.

Much of the narcotics trade focuses on squatter settlements in Brazil’s big cities. According to the Civil Police Narcotics Division, drug traffickers in the São Paulo periphery come in three classes: middleweights, lightweight and micros, also known as "little ants" (Formiguinhans). Middleweights and lightweights kill the most. The lightweights employ lookouts, transporters and managers in clearly defined territories. The micros are less organized, storing merchandise at home and often selling to sustain their own habit. Drug wars among gangs are commonplace. Professional killers or even delinquent police officers can be hired to carry out death sentences. Addicts are killed for unpaid debts to dealers or for committing petty robberies in their neighborhoods.

As killings multiply and go unpunished, the practice spreads. As the killings increase, so do “acceptable” motives for murder. According to this code of behavior, killing someone who owes money, for example, becomes a justifiable act. But killing brings the prospect of revenge, reinforcing the vicious cycle. When interviewed, a killer known as Flamarion tried to explain why he was going to kill someone in a few days: “My nephew was on his motorcycle when this kid tried to intimidate him, asking if he was a relative of mine. My nephew said he was. The kid started pushing him around and disrespecting him. That’s it. You don’t show respect and you die.”

According to the Nucleus of Violence Studies, 15% of the homicide cases studied were amorous or domestic disputes. Even in crimes of passion, the preferred method of killing seems to be execution. João Antônio, a 38 year-old store clerk, was killed in a crime of passion. He had left his family in the Northeastern state of Paraíba to try his luck in São Paulo. The job he got in a small grocery store allowed him to rent a small house on a plot of land owned by a woman with a beautiful daughter. The daughter had three children from a previous relationship. The father of the children made a living by parking cars at a restaurant, though the woman claims he was also involved in shady affairs. One thing is certain: he was a jealous man. When neighbors told the old boyfriend that João Antônio was courting his old lover, he told her that “this world is becoming too small” For the two men. João Antônio ignored his lover’s pleas to take the threat seriously. At 7 a.m. on September 12, 1999, the ex-boyfriend gunned down João Antônio as he was opening the grocery store. Killings during a robbery account for only 5% of all murders, but generate widespread fear and publicity. The danger of this kind of killing is increased by robberies on city buses, which have become a way for addicts to get money to buy crack. Buses are called cash machines, or “24 Hour Banks.” In 1999 there were 10,698 bus robberies, or one every hour. Every few months an episode occurs like the one at 5:10 a.m. on Friday, February 18,2000 in the industrial suburb of Santo André, when Agenaldo Viera, a 38 year-old bus driver, was murdered while trying to bypass a bus stop near the Favela da Juta, where several recent robberies had taken place and where he was warned that thieves were waiting to board the bus. Viera drove a bus that was robbed two months before at the same hour and place. On the morning of his death, Viera’s bus was full of passengers, including other drivers, going to work as well as a thief who ordered Viera to stop the bus as other members of his gang jumped aboard. With the bus still in motion, Viera was shot twice in the stomach and once in the head, dying instantly, as the bus crashed into two electricity poles. Some passengers tried to force open the rear door and escape through the windows, while others dived to the floor. “Let’s kill them all,” shouted one of the bandits as they started shooting at the people lying on the floor, wounding four of them. Even after the crash, they kept shooting. Immediately after the killing, 1,000 bus drivers in Santo André went on strike in protest against the wave of robberies, leaving one million poor people without public transportation. Relatives suspect that Vieira was executed because he identified the bandits in a previous bus robbery.

Chacinas

Chacinas, or multiple murders, amounted to less than 4% of homicides in São Paulo in
1999. Nevertheless, the shocking news generated by chacinas play a larger role in the city’s climate of violence than their numbers. The most significant trait of chacinas is that they all involve at least one victim sentenced to death. If the primary victim – that is, the one fingered – is with other people when killers track finally track him down, they also may die. Greater São Paulo’s biggest chacina took place in June 1998, in the suburban town of Francisco Morato. Twelve people were killed and three injured when a small bar was sprayed with more than a hundred bullets. Discovering who was the primary target in the police investigation was no easy task. The police narrowed possibilities to five targets. The bar’s owner was a car thief who killed his partner two days earlier. The partner’s relatives may have sought revenge. The bar owner’s girlfriend was a prostitute who blackmailed a local politician. Also, two dealers were selling drugs in the bar on the night of the massacre. Dealers and addicts are always the first suspects when killings occur. But not on that night. It turned out that the target was an 18 year-old girl named Evelyn who witnessed her boyfriend’s murder four months before. At great risk, Evelyn collaborated with the police investigation. The accused in her boyfriend’s murder were two policemen who decided not to run the same risk again by leaving witnesses. Their confidence in their own impunity was such that the two policemen also had a small private security firm called “The Untouchables.” The night of June 17 was Evelyn’s birthday. Revelers in the bar also were celebrating Brazil’s 3-0 victory over Morocco in a World Cup soccer match hours before. So Evelyn and her friends had reason to celebrate. The chacina ended the celebration. No one was spared: drug dealers, a car thief, a witness to a crime, a blackmailer, a bus driver, a welder, a postman, a stock clerk, a housemaid and a few unemployed. To the “Untouchables,” the lives of a dozen people were worth less than their need to avoid prosecution.

Chacinas may not be the work of killers out to murder groups of people. On the contrary. Multiple homicides tend to occur as events unfold, depending on the circumstances. If the target is in the company of others at judgment time, chances are everyone will die so that no witnesses remain. When interviewed, the killers confirmed the unpredictability of chacinas. “The less people the better. The problem is that sometimes we have to stop on a dime and act on the run. Someone says a guy is in such and such bar, so we load up and head on over there in a rush, with no time to even use ski masks. When that happens everyone’s gotta die”, explained Flamarion. How do they justify killing innocent people? In Flamarion’s words: “If you’re drinking in a bar at that hour, you can’t be good. Besides, you could be the victim’s friend or relative and could try to get revenge later on. We gotta watch our backs.”

Generalized violence can also lead to extreme sadism and cruelty. Killers have been known to kill the victim and his entire family so that revenge is complete. Children are not spared. In four consecutive chacinas in December 1999, 18 people were killed in four days in a territorial dispute among drug lords in the southeastern periphery. A dealer from Favela Heliópolis had moved in on another dealer’s territory in Favela Paraguai. The police linked the cases because all the victims were tied up with the same rope. When the dealer from Favela Heliópolis fled the neighborhood to avoid being killed, his entire family was slaughtered as a warning: four of the 18 victims were relatives.

Chacinas first appeared in São Paulo in the 1980s, but only began to attract media and public attention in 1994. Growing media coverage forced the police to create a special unit to investigate the causes of so many multiple murders. A two-year investigation showed that the causes of chacinas can be divided among narcotics, revenge, misunderstandings, crimes of passion, armed robberies resulting in fatalities, elimination of witnesses to murder, vigilante justice, sharing of stolen goods and financial debts, among others. The causes of multiple homicides, then, are like those of simple homicides, as are the victims. In both individual
and multiple homicides, the majority of victims range from 18 to 26 years of age, have no criminal record and never even reached high school. In both cases most victims are killed late at night, either on the street, in a bar or at home. Some are regular drug users or are involved in criminal gangs. These similarities also appear when comparing those who commit individual and multiple homicides. They are young men, many of which are drug addicts and repeat offenders. Their weapon of choice is a .38 caliber pistol.

Neither the police nor government officials take a clear stance on the rising number of multiple homicides. Yet it is clear that this epidemic of killings is linked to the practice of marking people for murder. In 1994, 34 chacinas were reported, causing 134 deaths. Over the next two years the number of chacinas hovered around 50. In 1999, 306 people were killed in 88 chacinas.

In early 2000 the frequency of chacinas accelerated from one every five days to one every three days. In February, after five chacinas that killed 23 people over a two-month period in the Favela Paraguai in the district of Vila Prudence in the eastern periphery, dwellers were forced to flee their homes after being terrorized by anonymous calls to the local public telephone warning that all who remained in the favela would be killed and their houses burned. Some piled their belongings onto carts and pickup trucks to move in with relatives, but many had nowhere to go. Women and children took refuge in a pentecostal church, where other families stored their furniture. “Some people are looking for bridges under which they can build shelters,” said one who stayed in the favela. “One phone call said that they wouldn’t even spare the children, but what can I do?”

Society, the State and Violence

Brazilian society cannot allow itself to remain impotent in failing to deal with the surge of homicides. Failure to engage the problem of violence on this scale would bring deeper disorganization of society at all levels of wealth and poverty. At the federal, state and municipal levels, government negligence in dealing with violence has been scandalous, especially in peripheral areas of the big cities. Merely blaming government officials is easy and requires no further commitment. However, government can be moved into more effective action only when civil society demands, pursues and invent credible solutions. The most powerful elements of civil society, the business and professional leaders, have failed to deal with these issues.

Curbing homicides means strengthening public institutions. The State must assume responsibility for the periphery. In Greater São Paulo, while physical infrastructure advances in marginal areas, social infrastructure is largely absent. There is no one magic policy formula to deal with processes as dynamic and complex as the escalation of violence. Reduction of homicides demands many kinds of initiatives, applied persistently over time, that can be activated and pursued only in response to community refusal to accept today’s low levels of public safety.

The range of actions needed to contain violence demands a level of political will never before seen in dealing with São Paulo’s huge problems. One key area is education. Police statistics indicate that both homicide victims and killers have little or no formal schooling. According to police numbers, only 2% of homicide victims ever reached high school. The remaining 98% is composed of young people who dropped out of school before the 8th grade, many of whom are illiterate. Of the killers, only 10% reached high school. The government, however, says that 95% of all children in Brazil attend primary school. Violence in the urban peripheries suggests that the other 5% makes a big difference.

Parents complain that half-day class schedules (in Brazil children attend school in either the morning or the afternoon) provide too little learning and too much idleness. Unsupervised children often get mixed up in criminal activities in the street, encouraged by what parents call the “wrong crowd.” Police reports frequently explain why adolescents first get involved in crime in terms of peer pressure outside of school. Child labor, criticized by the U.S. government, is often viewed with pride in Brazil’s urban peripheries. Going to school in the morning and working in the afternoon is one of the surest ways for a teenager to live a long life away from crime. Special programs could be developed by both the public and private sections to lengthen the school day from, say, four to six hours and to subsidize part-time jobs for adolescents.

Public investment in the social infrastructure of the periphery – in libraries, playgrounds, day-care centers, sports facilities, prolonging the school day and employment opportunities for adolescents – would provide a variety of jobs in these communities and upgrade their skills. In the southern periphery of the municipality of São Paulo, embracing two
million people, there is only one public library, which closes at 6 p.m. “One of my dreams is to have a public library open every night until 10 p.m.,” says a teacher. “Maybe those not in school would use the library more than those formally studying. Those in the age group of 40 to 50 years also have no meeting place or recreational options. Now there are only bars, where trouble often breaks out.” In the favela of Heliópolis, where many chacinas occur and police fail to patrol, only one school and one police station serve 80,000 people.

In addition to more intensive, intelligent and humane policing, public investment in social infrastructure would rend to reduce violence and accelerate the maturing of these communities. Organized crime is much less structured in São Paulo than in other big cities. This provides an opportunity that the State must use to control and compete with the promises of easy money from crime. Government projects involving the moral authority of mothers in these communities could be a viable way of encouraging children to live decent lives. Mothers are the care providers that most willingly invest their time in bettering the community. But they cannot do it alone.

The immense scale of Greater São Paulo is a major challenge to effective government. There is continuous lack of cooperation between the state government and local authorities in the 39 municipalities embraced by Greater São Paulo. Nor is there a metropolitan authority to deal with problems of scale peculiar to a megalopolis. Nor is there government support for civic groups willing and able to deal with local problems.

These are some actions needed to meet the challenge. Lacking is conviction that something can be done to reduce violence, as other cities have done, and the political will to seek solutions.
2. Homicides: What can the police do?

José Vicente da Silva Filho

A determined and well-planned effort by the police can reduce the number of homicides in Greater São Paulo. This depends on the priority assigned by the state government in dealing with the worst threat to public security that we face today.

Reducing homicides should be the first priority of police and governments in states where this problem is most serious. Any locality recording 30 homicides per 100,000 population has a very serious problem. It is most grave where the rate exceeds 50, as in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It is critical where it exceeds 70, as in the metropolitan areas of Vitória and Recife, and 10 smaller municipalities in São Paulo State.

The police persist in errors that limit their capacity to prevent and reduce murders. It treats this crime like any other, depriving it of the emphasis that it deserves. It deprives critical areas of needed patrols and intelligence. Rarely are the best police officers assigned to difficult areas, preferring easier jobs in the bureaucracy and specialized services. They fail to train competent detective teams. They fail to plan their actions in detail, assigning tasks and closely supervising performance. They suffocate the high motivation that police need to act effectively in peripheral communities.

No problem is so affected by the duplication of police forces into Civil and Military institutions as the control of homicide. Rivalries and cultural differences between two police chiefs, one Civil and the other Military, each with his own patterns of motivation and methods of analysis and planning, severely limit operational potential. The discontinuity between uniformed patrols, which reach homicide scenes first, and Civil Police detectives who get a case after hours or days of bureaucratic delays, drastically reduces chances of solving murders. Adjusting work routines of two police forces for joint actions demands administrative juggling and unselfish cooperation that is possible only in emergency work involving intense motivation, severe performance evaluation and public exposure.

In districts where homicides are serious problem we can no longer tolerate murder as abstract numbers in a statistical routine linked to problems of poverty, narcotics traffic or gang rivalries. We cannot just blame the dead. A strong and urgent program should seek ways to lessen numbers of homicides, exploring the potential of police organizations. We have no universal prescriptions, but would like to make suggestions to simulate thinking that could enable police to develop solutions to fit local realities. Here are some basic principles:

1. A specific police program for reducing homicides

A well-planned homicide-reduction program would give high priority to reducing homicides for police commanders in allocating resources, operations and supervisory capacity. This program should establish clear and specific goals, with critical diagnosis of local problems, distributing needed resources to priority areas, establishing
forms of joint action of the Civil and Military Police and technical experts, defining operational policies guiding local decision, planning support by specialized units, establishing standards for community involvement and performance evaluation.

This plan should be implemented vigorously with clearly-perceived changes, such as shifting of human resources to critical areas. Police resistance and substandard performance should not be tolerated. The program should be supervised by a special coordinating group in the Office of the Secretary of Public Security. The main idea should be that the most important task of the police is to reduce homicides.

2. Define areas of high priority

Analysis of geographical distribution of homicides and general police workloads should be made for each police district and for each borough command embracing several districts. Resources for investigation, including unmarked patrol cars, and street patrolling should be carefully analyzed for planned redeployment.

The districts of the Municipality of São Paulo average one homicide each week. An investigation team should be organized with enough resources to identify and arrest the killers. Stronger teams should be assigned to areas with more murders, such as the 100th Police District, where the homicide rate is four times higher. The teams in districts of most activity should receive proportionately more reinforcement, such as the 37th Police District, the scene of three murders weekly, in addition to lots of other criminal activity. Smaller municipalities with high homicide rates also should receive adequate investigative resources. Police chiefs with lighter workloads, such as those assigned to protection of women and children, should be trained by the Homicide Department to coordinate murder investigations as well.

3. Defining responsibilities

According to present routines for Greater São Paulo, local police districts take care of homicides when the killer is known and send all other cases to the Homicide Division, whose staff is hugely overburdened. The Military Police locates and preserves the crime scene and later informs the Civil Police of the murder.

Some mistaken procedures must be corrected to raise the number of solved crimes and arrests and to reduce the homicide rate. Each district should have its own homicide squad, trained to deal with unsolved murders. Each shift should have a detective on duty trained by the Homicide Division to go at once to the murder scene for a basic technical analysis. Besides getting information and identifying witnesses, this detective should carry a basic questionnaire sheet to identify suspects’ features, vehicles, weapons and modus operandi. A patrol sergeant trained in preserving crime scenes and collecting evidence should be sent to wherever a corpse is found. In borough commands with high homicide rates, more highly trained detective units should be formed to support investigations by district squads and deal with the most serious cases, such as those involving chacinas and professional killers who operate in several districts. The Homicide Division should be responsible for training police for investigating murders in local districts, supervision and technical support for ongoing investigations, investigating long-unsolved murders with minimum evidence and pursuing known killers in hiding. Decentralization of homicide investigation is needed because killers usually have links with specific areas and other local crimes.

4. Seizing illegal firearms

About 90% of homicides are committed with firearms, most of them illegal. The police routinely search people to find guns without permits and takes them to precinct stations to reduce the number of illegal guns in circulation. We need a new priority; the person carrying the gun is more important than the gun itself, especially if the police suspect that the gun may be used to commit crimes. We cannot simply disarm people, because firearms can be easily replaced by criminals.

The role of the Military Police

Street patrolling in high-homicide areas must focus on the sites where these crimes are most often committed, such as near bars and where drugs are bought and sold. People should be constantly searched near bars, places where offenders regularly meet, where drugs may be sold, as well as in vehicles. Police checkpoints, composed of at least two vehicles, should be permanently placed in the main access routes to violent areas, regularly rotating place and time. People carrying illegal handguns should be regarded as potential offenders...
and suspects of other crimes and thus should be
taken to police stations for further investigation.

The role of the Civil Police

An organization specialized in investigations,
the Civil Police must play an important role
in prevention of homicides, such as ceaselessly
pursuing known and potential killers, including
surveillance of proven aggressors enjoying relaxed
prison regimes, who may reside or loiter in their
area. The Civil Police should be able to contribute
to the reduction of illegal firearms in these ways:

• A database of seized weapons should be created,
containing information about their origins, their
destination and current location, bearer and likely
seller; as well as any police investigations where the
seller of the weapon may be involved.

• In the cases of suspicion that the guns were
used in criminal activities, these weapons should
undergo ballistic testing. The results of these rests
should be compared with tests performed at crime
scenes. The technical police should be properly
equipped to perform this task.

• Whenever an illegal firearm is seized, the
person carrying the gun must be checked in the
criminal File, photographed and questioned under
a basic procedure to uncover evidence of crimes
committed, focusing mainly on where and from
whom the weapon was obtained and who is using
these weapons to commit crimes. A procedure of
the New York Police Department could be adopted
under which every person arrested, no matter for
what type of crime, is asked: Who is selling or
trafficking in weapons in the city?

• In all cases where there is evidence about arms
sellers and smugglers, in-depth investigations must
be conducted so that they may be arrested. In cases
of arms trafficking and smuggling, involving out-
of-state or foreign arms sellers, the Federal Police
must be notified and asked to investigate further.

• Undercover investigations are very important
for seizure of illegal guns, and the arrest of those
who possess them, through surprise operations.

Police officers directly involved in the search
for weapons and suspects are among those most
exposed to danger. They must be carefully trained
on sate approach and reaction techniques, as well
as on organizing checkpoints and other operations.
They must be equipped with bulletproof vests,
portable intercoms and adequate weapons.
They must always alert their supervisors and the
operations center about their activities in high-risk
areas.

Departments of Internal Affairs must investigate
rigorously all cases where police officers may be
involved in the sale of illegal weapons or in the
undue release of bearers of illegal arms. Many
illegal guns have their serial numbers filed away.
Nonetheless, computerized records of weapons
seized by the Military Police show that every year
about 40 properly identified firearms are seized
again after being formally surrendered at police
precincts. We may assume that unidentified
weapons disappear in larger numbers. For example:
one Beretta 9 mm pistol, seria1 number C25870Z,
first apprehended by the Military Police in 1995,
was seized another eight times, proving that police
officers get rid of custodial paperwork and sell
the guns back to offenders, who may use them
against other police officers. There is no record of
policemen being prosecuted for this crime.

5. Interacting with the Community

The police must seek the support of the
community because it is the main source of
intelligence about crimes committed or about to
happen, criminals, places where offenders gather
and drugs are sold and sellers of illegal guns. To win
this support the police must earn the confidence of
the community it serves, through efficient arrest of
offenders menacing the area, respectful treatment
of locals even when suspected of offenses, through
facilities for anonymous tips (a call center operated
by civilians would be vital) and witness protection
schemes.

With authority and respect, currently invested
in few public institutions, the police can involve
communities in frequent meetings to analyze local
criminal activity and ways of preventing violence,
Families can help in limiting alcohol consumption,
resisting drug use by young people and alerting
police to conflict and circulation of guns in the
community.

6. Critical Areas Must be Reinforced

Critical areas in the struggle against homicides
are not given the necessary resources while low-
priority areas and activities continue to get more
than they need. Correction of these distortions
is urgently needed to build administrative and
operational rationality oriented toward results.
Here are ways to allocate resources to the areas
where they are most urgently needed:
• Ascertain where all policemen recruited and trained for these areas over the last 3 years have been allocated. Order those not already occupied in street patrols and other Forms of directly combating crime to report for duty immediately in critical areas.

• Reassign two thirds of the “shock troops” of the Military Police (about 2,000 men) to critical areas, where they should be subject to local command. Distribute the human and material resources of special operations units of the Civilian Police to the districts where investigators are most needed.

• Request the cooperation of public institutions where policemen are assigned for guard or ceremonial duties (Courts, Legislative Assembly, City Council) to cooperate with the homicide reduction program, freeing 30% to 50% of these police officers, preferably the youngest, for crime prevention in critical areas.

7. Additional Measures

• Computerized crime databases must be installed in every district. Police officers must be trained to use data analysis to target their policing and investigative activities. The databases must be improved to include the identification of suspects and their modus operandi.

• The Narcotics Department must have units operating in the districts where there are strong links between homicides and drug trafficking.

• Technical experts must be equipped not only to provide timely support in all homicide cases, but also to train police officers in the collection and preservation of criminal evidence. The development of DNA database technology should be accelerated in cooperation with universities and research funds. This capacity is needed for collection of decisive evidence to identify criminals as well as to avoid conviction of innocents.

• Retraining police chiefs and motivating the rank-and-file must create a critical mass of dedicated professionals. Assigning the best leaders to the most difficult areas, giving accelerated promotion to those working electively in critical areas and giving better pay to street patrolmen in high-risk areas may improve motivation that is lacking today in local police units. Finally, performance of the units and of their chiefs must be evaluated every two weeks in order to measure support needs in resources, analysis and intelligence, in the definition of operational tactics, coordination of Military and Civil Police activities, and even the replacement of chiefs. But the success at this program will depend on the police leadership’s conviction that positive results may be attained despite all our difficulties.

The first challenge is to get the police to believe they have the capacity to prevent and reduce homicides. We should set clear and ambitious goals. We can do it.
3. Controlling Illegal Firearms

Louis Anemone

Guns are the weapons in 59% of all homicides in New York and 90% of murders in São Paulo. An effective strategy to reduce possession and use of illegal firearms led to the decline of homicides and shootings in New York during the 1990s.

From 1993 through 1998, murders in New York decreased by 64% and shootings by over 66%! Remarkably, while the NYPD grew by over 10,000 officers during these six years, the number of policemen discharging their firearms fell from 479 in 1995 to 318 in 1998. Intentional shootings by police fell from 159 in 1995 to 111 in 1998. The number of bullets fired fell from 1,017 in 1995 to 526 in 1998. Persons shot by police fell from 70 in 1995, 26 of them fatally, while 62 were shot in 1998 with 19 deaths [compared with 593 civilians killed by police in São Paulo], even as arrests went from 309,000 in 1995 to 403,000 in 1998.

In those years civilian complaints against police rose by 354 while arrests rose by 100,000. We had our share of controversial police shootings or encounters during this time, but the general trend has been improving despite the shocking nature of some of these encounters, especially the police rape of Abner Louima in a Brooklyn precinct station in 1998 and the 41 police bullets fired by members of the Street Crime Unit in the Bronx to kill Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African migrant in 1999.

The reduction in shootings had a deep impact on the life of the city. The New York Times reported in 1998 that the New York City Health Department was planning to close some of its trauma centers because there were no longer enough shooting victims at these hospitals to give young doctors the experience they needed to perfect their craft as surgeons or emergency trauma physicians.

A general strategy is needed to achieve these results. This strategy appeared in Four Steps to Crime Reduction, devised by Jack Maple. The Four steps were:

1. Accurate and timely intelligence clearly communicated to all.
2. Rapid deployment of police forces.
3. Effective tactics.
4. Relentless follow-up and assessment.

Pursuing this strategy and development of the twice-weekly Compstat analysis sessions, using computerized data tracking local criminal activity and devising actions to reduce offenses, all played a decisive role.

Here are the basic procedures:

- Crimes of violence are computer pin-mapped. Starting with homicides, shootings, robberies, assaults, the computer and the map begin to paint a picture, layer by layer, of violence in the area being studied. Other layers of the computerized map help us understand the neighborhood and its problems; e.g. locations of methadone treatment centers, locations of second hand dealers, pawn shops, schools, parks, public housing developments, banks and locations of narcotics arrests and complaints of illegal drug activity. Locations where ballistic evidence has been matched to another shooting location are also computer pin-mapped. These maps can be manipulated to reveal activity in the prior week, the prior month or the year to date. Each precinct commander, borough commander and headquarters chief has access to the same data. Map data and weekly printouts of crime reports and arrest and summons activity help to focus discussions Compstat crime strategy meetings. Commanders are questioned in depth about crime in general and specific crimes. Tactics and strategies are developed to address these problems and are analyzed at the next meeting. Minutes are taken at each meeting and distributed so that everyone attending is aware of their responsibilities for follow-up. These meetings

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Louis Anemone, chief of New York City Police (1995-99), is a member of the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics. This article is taken from his talk at our international conference on violence and public security in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in October 1999.
also provide an opportunity for the chiefs to ask pointed questions on any aspect of the patrol, narcotic or detective operations in the each area.

Administrative and staff functions are analyzed, along with the involvement of the commander and his subordinates with the local community. How are community relations? Does the community support initiative a, b or c? Has the community been consulted or advised on recent crime patterns or initiatives? How are the civilian complaint levels in the precinct? Are there officers who have been identified as recidivists? What steps are being undertaken to modify behavior where appropriate?

Because we are dealing with statistics on police problems, every commander must ensure that the numbers are accurate and honestly compiled. There can be no tolerance of false or sloppy accounting practices. Examples of swift and certain punishment for this kind of fraud must be shown. The second feature of dealing with pin maps and crime numbers is that the police must never lose sight of the fact that each of those numbers a name, family, friends and loved ones deeply affected by every pin on the map. The human cost of uncontrolled crime is incalculable. But when successful strategies can reduce crime, the benefits to society are immediate and nourish a general feeling of safety. Some operational tactics that helped to reduce violence in New York City can be used in any city.

1. Gun Amnesty – A public information campaign announced a gun amnesty program to begin within a week. Public-spirited citizens and businesses were asked to donate funds for a cash payment or to underwrite certificates redeemable for goods at participating retail locations. Through the mass media, the public was advised that guns would be accepted at local police stations, no questions asked, for the duration of the program. Persons surrendering guns were given a choice of either the cash or gift certificates. The public was also informed that, once the program ended, the police would carry out an intensive enforcement effort to arrest those still possessing illegal handguns. This program led to the surrender of over 10,000 guns in the city during one week in 1994.

2. Ballistic Testing – Each gun recovered by the police, whether or not connected to an arrest, must be tested ballistically against evidence from a crime scene was checked by the ballistics squad. This was being done in New York City with the aid of federal agents. Over 100 firearms or casings were matched with other crime scenes, providing valuable leads to detectives.

3. Prisoner Debriefing – All prisoners in New York City are questioned by detectives as to their knowledge regarding the illegal sale or storage of firearms. Many criminals talk. Search warrants are obtained and firearms confiscated. This questioning of prisoners also reveals valuable intelligence on other crimes. It allows detectives to discover motives, find witnesses and locate of fenders wanted for many crimes. Results of individual debriefings are reviewed by detective supervisors to assure quality and thoroughness of the questioning.

4. Computer Mapping was made available to detective commanders. Visual representation helped to focus detective strategies and tactics on problem areas or “hot spots”. A series of violent crimes in a small area would result in a plan to address the problem. When guns were involved, an underlying motive was sought on the map. Was it a drug war? Were there nightclubs in the neighborhood? Was there youth gang war occurring? Specific tactics and strategies would be developed. Prisoners would be asked if they had intelligence on other local crimes. The process was repeated until success was achieved.

5. Licensed Firearms Dealers – A federal license is required to legally sell firearms in New York and other states. Conventional wisdom in New York and elsewhere was that most firearms used in crimes were either stolen or bought on the black market. A yearlong study of weapons recovered or used at crime scenes showed that 80% of the crime guns were sold by licensed dealers. Armed with this intelligence, visits were made to these dealers, books were examined and questions asked. Results, 80% of the dealers visited voluntarily surrendered their licenses the following year. Murders and shootings began to decline. The share of homicides using a handgun fell from 80% in 1993 before the program started to 59% by 1999.

6. Elite Proactive Patrol Units – Four hundred of the best patrol cops in the city were assigned to the Street Crime Unit to recover illegal handguns and deter violent street crime. They were trained by the department and the district attorneys in the...
city to lawfully detect and arrest armed criminals. Practical, tactical and legal training was given to successfully prosecute those arrested. This unit, involving one percent of the force, accounted for 20% of the illegal firearms recovered during 1998.

7. Gotcha Checkpoint – Police officers were directed by their supervisors to set up checkpoints at places with a history of crime and gun-related violence. Signs were set up announcing the checkpoint for illegal firearms directly ahead. A decoy checkpoint was directly ahead, however, the real checkpoint would be down a side street prior to the decoy intersection. When drivers saw the sign and then turned their vehicles into the side street they were confronted with the real checkpoint-Gotcha!

The goal is to create proactive, assertive police operations that do not violate the laws to achieve the mission. Crime prevented is more beneficial to society than arrests in ever-increasing numbers with no plan or forethought. Police leaders must overcome common problems like low pay, poor morale, understaffed police forces, poorly trained forces, outdated facilities and criminal justice systems that frustrate rather than facilitate police efforts. Police work is very hard indeed. If it were otherwise, anyone could do the job.

Translation: Todd Benson.