

A Report for the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing

Relationship-Based Policing: Achieving Safety in Watts

Constance Rice

Susan K. Lee

Edited by:

Josh Green

Melissa Nalani Ross



I. Introduction

The central question the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing was asked to answer was how can law enforcement foster strong, collaborative relationships with communities they protect and serve, while also implementing effective crime reduction strategies. The answer lies in what Urban Peace Institute¹ has coined as “relationship-based policing”. Relationship-based policing imagines a new way of operating for the police where their legitimacy in the community is built on procedural justice, authentic relationships with community members, and sustained commitment to improve the health and well-being of the community, not just a focus on crime statistics.

Over the past three years, Los Angeles has experimented with this model of policing, generating groundbreaking and remarkable change in one of the hardest, most violence-entrenched communities: the public housing developments of Watts. The success has been nothing short of transformative. Not only have violent crimes decreased precipitously, but arrests have gone down by 50%, with ordinary citizens telling visitors that they actually feel safer and know and trust police officers who have become a part of the community’s day-to-day landscape.

To be sure, there are things unique to Watts, from the extraordinary community and police leadership who have invested tremendous time and effort to building relationships, to the decade-long trajectory of reform at the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) that made this practice possible at this time. However, the Community Safety Partnership (CSP), as the relationship-based policing project is called, offers critical insight towards what law enforcement and communities across the country must be willing to do to move away from the oppressive and counter-productive policing the nation saw in Ferguson and move towards a collaborative and effective 21st Century policing.

II. Understanding Watts

Residents in the Watts neighborhood of L.A. experience high levels of gang activity as multi-generational gangs operate openly in its three largest housing developments: Jordan Downs, Nickerson Gardens, and Imperial Courts. Each of these housing developments are dominated by a single gang that has traditionally

¹ Urban Peace Institute (UPI) is formerly a program of Advancement Project. UPI launched as an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit in August 2015. Its mission is to develop practice, policy, and systems solutions to reduce violence, achieve safety, and improve community health so that families can thrive.

controlled much of the physical space of the housing development as well as dictated when and how families conduct their day-to-day activities. In addition to fostering an active drug market, the gang dynamic produces high levels of violence and crime. During the height of the crack wars, it was not uncommon for children to sleep in bathtubs to avoid being shot by a stray bullet from drive by shootings. In 2010 alone, residents reported 1,604 property crimes, 288 gang crimes and over 800 violent crimes in the Watts housing developments.

While violence and crime are the constant backdrop, Watts is also plagued by many other concentrated disadvantages including poorly performing schools, high unemployment and poverty, lack of economic development, very few green spaces and access to healthy foods, and an absolute shortage of prevention and intervention resources. It is also a place of historically heightened tension between the community and law enforcement, a dynamic that has persisted for decades, including before, during and after the 1965 Watts riots.

In 2010 and 2011, Urban Peace Institute was commissioned by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) to conduct an assessment and recommend violence reduction solutions for these three housing developments in Watts. After engaging over 900 residents through interviews, surveys and focus groups, and analysis of violent crime data and community risk and protective factors, the lack of safety in Watts was clear:

- 71% of all interviewees reported gang activity as “often a problem” or “always a problem” in their neighborhood;
- Despite being the numerical majority, Latino residents’ voices were not present in shaping community safety initiatives and they felt unable to exercise leadership in the community;
- Residents did not trust HACLA staff or law enforcement; and
- According to Advancement Project and Urban Peace Institute’s [Community Safety Scorecard](#), Watts ranked as one of the top 10 most dangerous zip codes in all of Los Angeles.

Although violence in 2010 was nothing close to that of the late 80’s and 90’s, and the gangs had lost ground in terms of their control over the developments, it was a sad reminder of the dangers the community faced when, on the day Urban Peace Institute’s community assessment and violence reduction recommendations were released, a Korean American family moving into one of the developments was

robbed and assaulted by the local gang, losing all of their personal property, while the women of the family came perilously close to becoming victims of a gang rape until a neighbor intervened. This incident, alongside Urban Peace Institute's assessment and recommendations, became the catalyst for the formation of the Community Safety Partnership project, Los Angeles' experiment in implementing a relationship-based policing model.

III. Building the Community Safety Partnership

In the seminal 1995 case, *Juan Zuniga et al. v. Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles et. al.*, the California Supreme Court found that HACLA was legally responsible – as any private landlord would be – to provide “safe public housing” for residents, free of “dangerous conditions.” In the past, HACLA had sought to abide by federal policy mandates; however, the increasing evidence of the entrenched dynamics of violence and fear among the residents called for bold action.

The findings from Watts residents in the Urban Peace Institute's assessment signaled a need for large-scale, systemic changes in order to promote community safety. This chronic need, vividly portrayed through the violent robbery of the new residents, led Urban Peace Institute, LAPD Chief of Police Charlie Beck, and former HACLA CEO Rudy Monteval to commit to ensuring the safety of the housing residents by entering into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that established the Community Safety Partnership (CSP). Through this partnership between Urban Peace Institute, the LAPD, and HACLA, a clear and collective CSP vision, mission, project design, and strategy was developed, grounded in the central tenets of relationship-based policing.

IV. The Community Safety Partnership in Practice

CSP Vision

The CSP vision is that communities in and around the selected housing developments will be able to sustain long-term community development and maintain safe, thriving and healthy communities, and that all individuals and families will be able to live in peace, feel safe in their surroundings, and experience a healthy quality of life.

CSP Purpose and Mission

The primary purpose of the CSP program is to increase and enhance the safety, security, and welfare of HACLA residents and the surrounding communities through the presence and sustainable relationships between LAPD officers, residents, and other community leaders deployed and assigned to the selected public housing developments. The secondary purpose of the CSP Program is to provide ancillary programs for residents that support, directly or indirectly, the program's primary purpose.

The mission of the CSP officers is to use relationship-based policing strategies to build trust between law enforcement and the community, leading to decreased crime and improved community perceptions of safety through: 1) long-term relationship development; 2) community capacity development; and 3) community partnering and input.

CSP and Law Enforcement Support

The MOU provided for deployment of 45 LAPD officers to the selected housing developments as a special unit with an independent chain of command. All selected officers received a promotion for participating in the unit and committing to being deployed to the unit for five years. LAPD assumed the cost of the base salaries of the officers selected and HACLA provided the funds to pay for the officer promotions and overtime, the evaluation of the project and a pool of funds to support community based prevention and intervention programs. Urban Peace Institute committed to support the project by conducting officer trainings, technical assistance for program implementation, and strategic partnership development.

Relationship-Based Policing

The key guiding principle of the project from design to implementation has been the concept of relationship-based policing. Urban Peace Institute defines relationship-based policing as a law enforcement practice that relies on community trust and partnership, and authentic police legitimacy based on procedural justice to achieve community safety. To develop the trust and legitimacy, officers practicing relationship-based policing are mandated to intentionally develop relationships with community members, to seek out partnerships with community stakeholders, such as service providers and other public sector entities, to work with schools to coordinate safety strategies, and to take a problem-solving approach to community safety concerns rather than a suppression-only (e.g. arrests) approach.

Some necessary conditions for the practice of relationship-based policing are long-term deployment of officers to a geographic area, specialized training and professional development on aspects of relationship-based policing (e.g. collaboration, mediation skills, understanding of youth development principles), and incentive structures designed to reward officer behaviors that traditional metrics of enforcement practice do not capture (e.g. diversion of youth offenders, ensuring safe passage for students traveling to school, partnering with community stakeholders to solve safety issues).

V. Record of Success

In its first three years of operation, CSP has already produced real, tangible impact on the ground. In addition to reducing violent crime by more than 50% in all three Watts housing developments, the number of arrests have also declined by 50%. Jordan Downs, one of the most violent housing development and the home of the notorious Grape Street Crips has gone three years without a single homicide. (See attached Urban Institute Assessment) LAPD will also attest to the fact that the several homicides that did occur in the past three years resulted in quick arrests because of the trust built with the community.

More important than the statistics, there is a tangible difference in how residents and young people are interacting with the police. One officer noted at the one year mark how remarkable it was to have grandmothers wave to him rather than yell at him and how often he finds himself surrounded by children who want to give him a hug. Although there is still much to be accomplished and the trust between community and LAPD is fragile, it is clear that now there is a solid foundation to build upon for the future.

VI. Key Elements of CSP Success

Operationalizing the Community Safety Partnership required carefully thinking about the context and what would work. Key elements of success included the following:

1. Recruitment & Incentives

The foundational element to success for relationship-based policing is to find the right police officers; those who authentically believe it is worthwhile to build relationships with community members and doing so will lead to more effective policing more effective officers. Over 400 LAPD officers applied for the 45 CSP slots, primarily because this deployment offered a promotion during a time when budget constraints had frozen most promotions. Each applicant went through a rigorous interview process with credible, LAPD executive leadership and

command staff who had already demonstrated commitment to the relationship-based policing approach and, therefore knew to look for a particular set of skills and track-record. Particular attention was given to cultural competency, bilingual abilities (especially given the large majority of immigrant Latino residents in Watts), aptitude for conflict resolution, and ability and interest in working with a broad cross-section of stakeholders.

While the initial offer of a promotion brought a robust pool of applicants, the challenge of how to institutionalize on-going incentives for relationship-based policing practices remains. LAPD Chief Beck has made it clear that he values the work of the CSP officers and strong support from the top executive can make a big difference in the success of relationship-based policing strategies. For LAPD, the Chief's commitment is part and parcel of a 10 year the department-wide cultural shift which has brought forth widespread and institutionalized commitment to changing on-the-ground dynamics between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve. However, to make this practice a part of LAPD and any law enforcement agency's DNA, it will be necessary to formally integrate elements of relationship-based policing as a must-have criteria for professional development and promotion of officers (e.g. credit for diversion of young people, special recognition for developing community-driven safety solutions that become part of the official employment record, promotional criteria that incorporate key relationship-based policing indicators).

2. Training

Even the most community-minded officer selected to become a CSP officer has needed specialized training to prepare her or him for the task. All selected CSP officers went through more than 100 hours of training. Importantly, 40 of those hours were conducted by Urban Peace Institute to begin the work of implementing a relationship-based policing model. The fact that a non-law enforcement entity, let alone a civil rights organization, was allowed to conduct training was transformative, as police trainings are notoriously insular and exclusive of external expertise.

The Urban Peace Institute training focused on the history of LAPD relationships with L.A.'s communities of color and the historic enmity rooted in decades of LAPD practices that were overtly racist and oppressive. In short, the lesson was about "why does the community hate LAPD?" The training also included concrete data about the housing developments, including the identified needs and desires of the residents, often highlighting the voice of the residents themselves derived from AP Urban Peace focus groups, interviews and surveys.

Finally, in addition to developing concrete skills in conflict resolution, communication and data analysis, officers also spent significant time with key community stakeholders from each of the housing developments to lay the groundwork for relationship-building.

To implement effective relationship-based policing, officer training must be on-going. Because standard police training regimens do not currently integrate on-going awareness of evolving community dynamics, the development of new skills designed to build trust with the community (e.g. understanding adolescent brain development), or support in identifying key allies to promote safety, there must be a demonstrated commitment to augment traditional policing with professional development opportunities. These professional development opportunities must support and encourage police officers to see themselves as a part of a larger eco-system striving for safety through relationship-based policing practices. Practically speaking, a critical consideration for this on-going training is the availability of resources to not only bring in outside expertise but also to alleviate law enforcement deployment constraints that are often cited as the reason why officers cannot participate in training.

3. Community Engagement

Even before the CSP came into being, significant strides had been made in Watts towards opening up communication channels between police and community. Mostly due to the extraordinary effort of a few LAPD officers and community leadership invested in trying new and innovative approaches, such as the Watts Gang Task Force, a sustained space for dialogue had built a track record for developing trust, particularly between long-term African American residents and LAPD command staff. In fact, the leadership of LAPD South Bureau had already established a practice of working with gang intervention or street outreach workers long before CSP came into being. These relationships allowed them to communicate directly with key ex-gang members who were committed to building peace by intervening in potentially explosive situations to prevent retaliatory shootings and violence, which set the stage for the broader relationship-based policing practices that followed.

However, the fact that a unit of LAPD officers have been trained and deployed to specifically foster community relationships and build on the track-record of collaboration is noteworthy. It is no longer an isolated tactic of a few officers but an established practice endorsed by the highest ranks of LAPD, and most importantly by the immediate chain of command that governs CSP officers. This

mandate to build direct relationships with community members towards the re-defined goal of community safety, security and welfare, not solely crime reduction, is what differentiates CSP from many other policing innovations. Community members now see police officers as individuals committed to the overall health and well-being of the community, not just the reduction of crime statistics through suppression-only police tactics. This sense of shared goal, particularly about improving the future for the children and the young people in the community, lays a solid foundation for trust and relationship-building.

4. Data Driven Accountability

CSP was built on community-driven data. Throughout the assessment conducted by Urban Peace Institute, community stakeholders often spoke of one shared vision: a Watts safe enough that youth from all three developments would be able to safely attend the local high schools. While the assessment noted serious safety deficits in Watts, it also revealed clear assets such as motivated residents with strong desire and will to build safety, service providers dedicated to the community, increasing commitment from public sector entities, and some promising practices in leadership development among residents. Relying on the data feedback from the community and best practices research, the CSP program has largely been designed and implemented based on addressing these assessment findings – both the deficits and the assets of each community.

Founded on the principles of an evidence-based research, the CSP policing model is a data-driven, community-based, safety program. In order to ensure its success, the CSP program includes a call for a robust evaluation process that includes measurable indicators with regular data collection over the course of the five-years project commitment. Most importantly, however, may be the role that the on-going evaluation process plays in bringing additional accountability to these violence reduction efforts. The evaluation measures the strengths and weakness of programmatic elements, gathers input, and highlights opportunities for improvement to all parties involved.

VII. Conclusion

The Community Safety Partnership (CSP) is an evidence-based, community-centered model geared toward a comprehensive violence reduction strategy. The CSP program is the Los Angeles communities' and the public sector's bold attempt toward a comprehensive solution to gang violence in the selected hot

zone communities in the City's public housing developments. CSP was developed from an urgent need for a broad and sustainable solution to violence and the need to overcome a history of hostile police-community relationships to be able to do so. This research-based model is structured to provide continuous data feedback from all community stakeholders and create a solid relationship-based policing model that increases the safety and health of these communities.