



## Drugs, Race and Common Ground: Reflections on the High Point Intervention

by David Kennedy

**Editor’s Note:** At the 2008 NIJ Conference, David Kennedy, director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, talked about his work to combat drug markets, especially the High Point Intervention, an innovative program that is now being replicated in at least 25 sites around the country. This article is based on his remarks.

When Chief James Fealy arrived in High Point, N.C., in 2003, he found parts of the city awash in drugs and dealers. But rather than relying on traditional suppression and interdiction approaches to fight the problem, Fealy — who had worked narcotics for more than a quarter of a century in the Austin (Texas) Police Department — spearheaded a new, potentially transformative strategy.

Its roots were in the now-familiar “focused deterrence” approach, which addresses particular problems — in this case drug markets — by putting identified offenders on notice that their community wants them to stop, that help is available and that particular criminal actions will bring heightened

law enforcement attention. The High Point initiative, however, added the unprecedented — and initially terrifying — element of truth-telling about racial conflict. The result of these conversations in High Point was two-fold: a plan for doing strategic interventions to close drug markets and the beginning of a reconciliation process between law enforcement and the community.

Here is how the High Point Intervention works: A particular drug market is identified; violent dealers are arrested; and nonviolent dealers are brought to a “call-in” where they face a roomful of law enforcement officers, social service providers, community figures, ex-offenders and “influentials” — parents, relatives and others with close, important

relationships with particular dealers. The drug dealers are told that (1) they are valuable to the community, and (2) the dealing must stop. They are offered social services. They are informed that local law enforcement has worked up cases on them, but that these cases will be “banked” (temporarily suspended). Then they are given an ultimatum: If you continue to deal, the banked cases against you will be activated.

This strategy is being replicated in other cities by the Bureau of Justice Assistance through the Drug Market Intervention Initiative. (For more information on how this intervention model evolved, see “How It All Began: The Evolution of the High Point Model,” page 14.) In High Point and in other cities, the drug markets have closed and there have been large reductions in violent and drug-related crime, with no sign of displacement. A fundamentally new understanding between law enforcement and the community may be the most important outcome. (See “Evaluating the High Point Intervention,” page 16.)

When the conversations between law enforcement and the community began, many people said, “You can’t do anything about drugs. You can’t do anything about growing or trafficking or dealing or addiction.” To move forward, however, both law enforcement and the community needed to be convinced that this was not about *drugs*; this was about a certain form of drug *market*. That is, a community can handle a lot of drug use and survive. But it cannot handle drug dealers taking over public space, attracting drive-through buyers and prostitutes, and shooting the place up. Therefore, our primary goal was to close what we came to call the “overt markets.”

## Hard Talk: A Conversation About Race

Open-air drug markets are found primarily in our cities and in African-American neighborhoods. Although we are loathe to admit it, this issue is soaked in race.

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As we were developing the High Point intervention model, we heard a consistent narrative from law enforcement officers. They perceived that:

- Drug dealers shoot each other for no good reason, and they recruit children as couriers and lookouts.
- The dealers’ own families — and their own community — do not tell them to stop.
- There is no expectation that people should finish school and take entry-level jobs.
- No one cares. There is no moral backbone left in the community. Everyone is profiting.
- Nothing could be done that involved a partnership with the community because there was no real community left to partner with.

This is fundamentally wrong: The community does care, it is not complicit and it does not approve. But I understand why law enforcement thinks this; it is what they perceive.

Conversely, the community believed that:

- The police are part of a conspiracy to destroy the community.
- The CIA invented crack, and the government brings the drugs into the country.
- The government passed “three strikes” laws to put all our children in prison for the rest of their lives.

*(continued on page 15)*

**HOW IT ALL BEGAN: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HIGH POINT MODEL**

The story began in Boston in 1996, when an intervention called Operation Ceasefire largely stopped gang violence in the city. Operation Ceasefire combined problem-oriented policing with collaboration between law enforcement organizations and community stakeholders.

During face-to-face meetings, it was made clear to gangs that:

- If anyone in the gang shot someone, all members of the gang would receive attention from law enforcement.
- The community needed the violence to stop.
- Social services and other help were available for those who wanted off the streets.

Operation Ceasefire was associated with a 63-percent reduction in youth homicide (ages 24 and under).

In October 2000, the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI) was launched. SACSI mirrored Operation Ceasefire in that it brought together law enforcement organizations, community partners and researchers to address crime problems. Most SACSI sites ended up working to reduce gun violence and using variations of the Boston model, but one site — Memphis — strived to lower the nation’s highest sexual assault rate, with considerable success.

Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), established in 2001, builds from an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the SACSI model. PSN creates partnerships among federal, state and local prosecutors; law enforcement; researchers; media and outreach specialists; and community leaders. It tailors the intervention strategy to the needs of each individual district and to the gun problem in that particular area.

The High Point Intervention (also known as the Drug Market Intervention) draws on the principles of Operation Ceasefire, SACSI and PSN to not only stop gun violence, but also to shut down open-air drug markets and the chaos that comes with them: the street sales, crack houses, drive-through buyers, prostitution, gunplay and the taking over of public space. A separate program, the Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative, is using a similar approach to address gang membership. (For more information on these initiatives, see [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/gun-violence/prevention](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/gun-violence/prevention).)



These views are no more true than the views held by the police. There is no conspiracy; rather, the tragedy we are watching unfold is more akin to a train wreck. But, again, I absolutely understand why the community believes it. African-American communities have historically been subject to deliberate oppression by law enforcement, from slave-catching through Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement. Today the community sees relentless drug enforcement: People are stopped on the street. Their doors are kicked in. They are taken from their families and sent to prison at enormously high rates; and they come back with criminal records, unable to get a legitimate job.

Today, one in three black men in this country will go to prison.<sup>1</sup> In some communities, the majority of young black men end up with criminal records. In Baltimore, Md., for example, half of the African-American males between the ages of 20 and 30 are under court supervision — they are in prison, in jail, on parole or on probation.<sup>2</sup> This is not about bias, profiling, abuse or any other way we usually talk about criminal justice problems. I work in these communities. The crime is real, and overwhelmingly the arrests are legitimate. But we are destroying the village in order to save it.

And none of this gets rid of the crime. The drug markets and violence continue to exist. The relentless enforcement continues. Much of the community believes this is, in fact, the goal of drug enforcement: to put their young men in prison. This is the main reason for the community silence. It does not stem from complicity, support or tolerance. But if standing against drug crime means standing with an “enemy,” people will not do it.

These dynamics have created a brick wall that precludes meaningful conversations. The key to getting through that brick wall in High Point turned out to be telling the truth. You cannot get rid of history, but you can face facts, be honest and find a way to move forward.

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We found that when we discussed race in the context of a core community issue — drug markets — we could make progress because everyone agreed on the basics. The community, the police, even the dealers wanted to be safe. Everyone wanted to stop filling prisons. Everyone wanted the most dangerous people stopped and help for those who would take it. Everybody would rather have the community step up and law enforcement step back.

### **The Truth-Telling Begins**

Working with the Project Safe Neighborhoods team, we began a series of conversations within the High Point Police Department. We explored why the community thought that law enforcement was an enemy: “We are trying to do good, but here are the unintended consequences of the way we have been doing things. We did not mean for this to happen, but this is what has happened, and we need to understand it.”

These discussions were followed by blunt conversations with the community. The main questions we asked were, “Are you saying no? Are you making a clear community statement about what is right and wrong and what you expect of your own?”

The community’s response was, “No. We’re not doing that ... and we know it.” They told us that their parents and grandparents would never have put up with the situation. “If we are putting up with it,” community members acknowledged, “that is on us.”

**Editor's Note****EVALUATING THE HIGH POINT INTERVENTION**

In 2006, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to evaluate the intervention in High Point, N.C. The researchers are:

- Documenting the process that occurred in High Point.
- Tracking the intervention's quantitative and qualitative outcomes.
- Conducting a cost-benefit analysis.

Preliminary results are promising: The researchers have found that in the four years since the intervention was implemented in one High Point neighborhood, for example, violent crime has declined an average of 39 percent and drug crime has declined 30 percent. The final results from the evaluation are expected this spring. For more information, see [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/gun-violence/prevention/focused-deterrence.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/gun-violence/prevention/focused-deterrence.htm).

Here are additional resources related to the High Point Intervention:

- The Bureau of Justice Assistance, one of the NIJ's sister agencies, offers training and technical assistance for local jurisdictions interested in implementing the High Point model in their communities to combat open-air drug markets and associated crime. For more information, see [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov).
- Through a cooperative agreement between the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the National Urban League, the High Point model has been replicated in Providence, R.I. A resource publication for law enforcement that details the efforts in both High Point and Providence will be available later this year.

**Putting the Dealers on Notice**

All of these conversations converged toward a "call-in," a meeting at which everyone could say to the dealers, "Enough!"

The central moment of these call-in meetings comes when community elders, parents and other loved ones look the drug dealers in the eye and say, "We love and care about you. We want you to succeed. We need you alive and out of jail. But if you do not absolutely understand that we disapprove of what you are doing, we are going to set that straight today."

The community is infinitely tougher than anyone else could ever be.

On the law enforcement side, the signal moment occurs when officers tell all the dealers in the room, "We want to take a chance on you. We have done the investigation, and we have cases against you ready to go. You could be in jail today, but we do not want to ruin your life. We have listened to the community. We do not want to lock you up, but we are not asking. This is not a negotiation. If you start dealing again, we will sign the warrant, and you will go to jail."

This strategy does several things: It puts the dealers in a position where they *know* that the next time they deal drugs, there will be formal consequences. It proves to the community that the police are not part of a



conspiracy to fill the prisons with their children. And it frees the community to take a stand — an amazing thing to see.

## Promising Results

The first of these conversations occurred more than four years ago in High Point. Since then, the approach has been replicated in at least 25 other U.S. cities. In each case, the drug market evaporated at the time of the meeting; most of them have not come back. This success has been fairly easy to maintain. Most of the weight is carried by the community, which simply will not let the market come back. If they cannot deal with the situation, they have a new relationship with law enforcement, which will step in.

Overall, we are seeing sustained 40 to 50 percent reductions in violent and drug-related crime, and we have found little or no displacement. We are also seeing a diffusion of benefits — that is, surrounding areas also get better. (See “Evaluating the High Point Intervention,” page 16.)

The difference in these communities is palpable and amazing. The larger lessons are just beginning to be clear to us: We have profoundly misunderstood each other; our current behavior has pushed us to places that none of us liked; and we have all been doing inadvertent but severe harm. We have also learned that community standards can and will do much of the work we currently try to do through law enforcement, that even serious offenders can be reached, and that we can find critical common ground.

These lessons might fundamentally reshape how we think not only about crime, but also about each other.

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## Notes

1. Bonczar, T.P., and A.J. Beck, *Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison*, Special Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, March 1997 (NCJ 160092), available at <http://ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/lgsfp.pdf>.
2. Lotke, E., and J. Ziedenberg, *Tipping Point: Maryland's Overuse of Incarceration and the Impact on Public Safety*, Policy Brief, Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2005.

## About the Author

David Kennedy is the director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control and a professor of anthropology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. From 1993 to 2004, he was a senior researcher and adjunct professor with the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. His work focuses on strategies for assisting troubled communities. Kennedy has written and consulted extensively in the areas of community and problem-solving policing, deterrence theory, drug and firearms markets, and neighborhood revitalization. He has performed fieldwork in police departments and communities in many American cities and internationally. His new book, *Deterrence and Crime Prevention: Reconsidering the Prospect of Sanction*, has just been published.