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OP-ED (The Opinion Pages)

Beyond Stop-and-Frisk

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New Haven

IN the face of growing anger over the New York Police Department's stop-and-frisk policy, the commissioner, Raymond W. Kelly, has faulted his critics for failing to offer an alternative for fighting crime in minority neighborhoods. "What I haven't heard is any solution to the violence problems in these communities," he told the City Council last month.

Mr. Kelly is correct that high levels of violence are intolerable and that those who would challenge stop-and-frisk — in which police officers use thin pretexts for streetside searches — must present credible alternatives. At the Yale Law School Innovations in Policing Clinic, we have been visiting police departments around the country in search of such strategies. One increasingly popular approach, "focused deterrence," is among the most promising.

Developed by the criminologist David M. Kennedy, focused deterrence is in many ways the opposite of stopping and frisking large sections of the population. Beginning with the recognition that a small cohort of young men are responsible for most of the violent crime in minority neighborhoods, it targets the worst culprits for intensive investigation and criminal prosecution.

Focused deterrence also builds up community trust in the police, who are now going after the real bad guys instead of harassing innocent bystanders in an effort to score easy arrests.

This strategy was responsible for the dramatic decline in Boston's homicide rate during the 1990s. In 2004, Mr. Kennedy and his colleagues successfully adapted it to combat violent open-air drug markets in the West End neighborhood of High Point, N.C.

Rather than sweep through and stop large numbers of young black men, the police built strong relationships with residents, promising greater responsiveness if they took back the reins of their community and told their sons, nephews and grandsons that the violence and the overt dealing must end. Meanwhile, the police identified the 17 men driving the drug market and built solid cases against each. In one fell swoop, they arrested three with violent records.

The other 14 men were then summoned to a community meeting. Neighborhood residents demanded that they put an end to the violence. Law enforcement officials made credible threats of prosecution, but also told the men they had one last chance to turn their lives around. Meanwhile, social service providers offered them job training, drug treatment and mentoring.

Most of the men listened. The city's most significant drug market vanished overnight, and it has not come back. Violent crime has fallen by half.

Why did the strategy succeed? The Rev. Sherman Mason, a local minister, told us that a key factor was the decision to involve neighborhood residents in the process. As a result, the police gained legitimacy, and their relationship with the community was transformed.

While focused deterrence is among the most thoroughly researched efforts to reduce crime while building community trust, it is not the only one.

In Seattle longtime adversaries, including the police department and the public defender's office, are collaborating on a program to authorize police officers to divert drug offenders to treatment.

In Illinois and in Washington State, efforts are under way to train officers in "procedural justice," in other words, how to operate in a more transparently fair way, as people are more likely to comply with the law if the police treat them with dignity and respect.

New York has a moral imperative to address violence. But stop-and-frisk practices are harming the community in order to protect it, and the costs of those practices can no longer be justified by the claim that nothing else will work. There are other ways.

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