DON'T SHOOT

ONE MAN, A STREET FELLOWSHIP, AND THE END OF VIOLENCE IN INNER-CITY AMERICA

DAVID M. KENNEDY

BLOOMSBURY

Praise for *Don't Shoot*

"*Don't Shoot* will do for the fight against violence what Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* did for the environmental movement a generation ago."

—Malcolm Gladwell

"The good news about the drug- and gang-related violence epidemic is that it can be controlled and substantially reduced. As proof, you only have to read David Kennedy's wonderful new book, *Don't Shoot*. It chronicles his ideas and crusade to bring police and communities together in partnerships to successfully deal with the cancer of drug-related crime and violence that has ravaged those communities and demoralized the police. Now being tried in over seventy communities, David's campaign is expanding to have the national and international impact it deserves."

—Bill Bratton, chairman of Kroll and former chief of police of the Los Angeles Police Department

"*Don't Shoot* is a work of moral philosophy that reads like a crime novel—Immanuel Kant meets Joseph Wambaugh. It's a fascinating, inspiring, and wonderfully well-written story of one man's quest to solve a problem no one thought could be solved: the scourge of inner-city gang violence. We had tried arresting these young men, incarcerating them, and outgunning them, always without lasting success, but what had never been tried before David Kennedy and his colleagues began piecing together their methodology was the simplest and yet most radical approach imaginable: listening to them, and harnessing the greatest force of all—the moral authority of their peers. This is a vitally important work that has the potential to usher in a new era in policing."

—John Seabrook

"*Don't Shoot,* based on David Kennedy's fresh rereading of criminology, his time on the ground with police, gangs, and families, and his indignation with the slaughter of young black men, brings together what is truly one of a small number of 'big ideas' revolutionizing crime control, especially policing and prosecution. Shame on any city, police department, or prosecutor's office that isn't learning from his experience. What *Don't Shoot* documents really matters."

—George Kelling, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute,
professor of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University,
and fellow in the Kennedy School of Government
at Harvard University

"Despite the recent and welcome decline in United States crime, gun crime remains a persistent concern in this country. Solutions to the 'gun problem,' fueled by ideological, constitutional, and moral debates, diverge considerably. In *Don't Shoot*, David Kennedy elegantly and forcefully describes an approach to stopping gun violence that does not depend on policing gun crime with guns or solving crime's root causes. Instead, his approach leans on the power of community trust in the law and officials—legitimacy. Offenders can and do voluntarily comply with the law. When they do, neighborhoods are safer, fewer people go to prison, and policing is turned on its head."

—Tracey L. Meares, deputy dean and
Walton Hale Hamilton Professor, Yale Law School

"David Kennedy's work helped Cincinnati revolutionize the way that we think about policing our community. His passion for solving the never-ending cycle of violence is evident in every conversation with him. We have found that by engaging offenders with a strong, unified, community message telling them that the violence must stop and offering them an alternative life, we can have a meaningful and lasting impact in our community. David's work is a must-read for mayors around the country confronted with the scourge of gun violence in their cities."

—Mark Mallory, mayor of Cincinnati, Ohio

"The author brings more than two decades of practical, administrative, managerial, supervisory, and academic experience to this work of art. A unique and comprehensive view of the toxic impact of mass incarceration on our most vulnerable neighborhoods as seen through the eyes of this criminal justice professional. A must-read."

—Patrick R. Melvin, national president of the National
Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE)

"David M. Kennedy's latest work is an invitation to the future of urban policing. In these pages is a dynamic exploration of racial reconciliation, stakeholder partnerships, and mass incarceration alternatives as key components of crime reduction. Kennedy's ideas extend beyond community policing and serve to revolutionize the entire criminal justice system."

—Garry F. McCarthy, superintendent of Chicago police

"The book provides a raw and unadulterated look at gang violence as well as Mr. Kennedy's approach to combating it on a national level. His commitment over the years has helped to save and change the lives of many youth. This is a must-read for all!"

—Tyrone C. Parker, executive director, Alliance of Concerned Men

"The subtitle for this book, *The End of Violence in Inner-City America*, would be pretentious if it were not for the indisputable evidence, compelling true stories, and common sense solutions detailed therein. Bottom line: this works."

—Reverend Kenneth Edward Copeland,
New Zion Baptist Church in Rockford, Illinois

Don't Shoot

One Man, a Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America

David M. Kennedy

BLOOMSBURY
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To all whom we have failed so grievously.

Zina Jacque got it right, fifteen years ago. We're here to say two things. One is, we're sorry. But sorry is never enough. The second thing is, we're going to fix it.

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Introduction

Timothy Thomas, a nineteen-year-old black man, a father, engaged to be married, ran from a police officer. The police officer called for backup. The chase poured into an alley. Thomas took a single round to his chest. The officer claimed he had a gun. He had no gun.

It could have been any American city, but it was in fact Cincinnati, in a poor, black, high-crime neighborhood called Over-the-Rhine. Cincinnati's racial tensions have long been rawer, and closer to the surface, than in many other places. It was the home of white Marge Schott, forced out of her ownership of the Cincinnati Reds for such things as comments about "million-dollar niggers," and of flamboyant black criminal defense lawyer Kenneth L. Lawson, who advertised his practice with posters showing him seated on a throne with a decapitated white body at his feet. The city burned during the national wave of race riots in 1967, and again in 1968 after Martin Luther King was assassinated; toxic relations between Cincinnati police and the city's black population featured in the benchmark report of the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—the Kerner Commission report. Things hadn't gotten much better in the two decades since. Between then and April 7, 2001, the day Timothy Thomas was killed, there had been report after report, thirteen in all: one showing that Cincinnati's Office of Municipal Investigation found misconduct on the part of ninety-four police officers over five years, none of whom were disciplined, another surveying police officers and finding that 86 percent thought that there was racism in the department. Before Timothy Thomas, Cincinnati police had killed four black men since November of the previous year, and thirteen between 1995 and 2000.

He ran, he died, and Cincinnati burned again. Blacks squared off against the police on the streets, around city hall, around police headquarters. There was arson, gunfire, looting, tear gas. A truck driver was dragged from his rig and beaten bloody. A cop was shot; miraculously, his belt buckle deflected the round. Shots were fired into whites' homes. Mayor Charles Luken locked the city under curfew for four days; police arrested seven hundred people. Al Sharpton flew in from Africa to join Martin Luther King III and Kweisi Mfume at Thomas's funeral. Cincinnati, Mfume said, is "ground zero" for racism, the "belly of the whale." Shortly after, Harry Belafonte would walk Over-the-Rhine and declare it a third-world country.

It is practically a script, the American riot. Horrible, inexcusable, and I honestly do not know, given the reality on the ground, why it is not more common.

Timothy Thomas ran because he had fourteen outstanding warrants, most of them for traffic offenses: driving without a seat belt, driving without a license, all incurred since February 2000, twenty-one traffic charges in less than a year and a half. He had been stopped, over and over and over, in practice the only way a police officer is going to see an unworn seat belt and ask for a nonexistent license. Stopped and then ticketed: over and over and over.

"One day Tim came in the house, and he was like, 'Mom, I got two tickets . . . it's like two tickets, Mom, for the same thing," said his mother, Angela Leisure. He got two more that same day. That's what happens, said Over-the-Rhine's black residents. Police couldn't, or didn't, differentiate between the hapless, like Timothy Thomas, the serious criminals, and everybody else. "They figure they out there selling drugs, and this and that," said Tim's brother Terry. "I mean yeah, there's a few drug dealers, but you can't just point them out and say, yeah, he's a drug dealer. If you ain't seen it or know he doin' it, you can't just point him out. But that's what they was doing. They was just picking you out the crowd, like. And Tim got picked out a lot of times. But they didn't have no reason to pick him out."

I spend a lot of time with blacks in this kind of neighborhood; pretty much all the men tell this story. I spend a lot of time with blacks, not in this kind of neighborhood; most of them tell this story. I spend a lot of time with whites, not in this kind of neighborhood. I've never once heard them tell this story. I spend a lot of time with cops in this kind of neighborhood. Not long ago, in this kind of neighborhood, I rode with them. All involved knew their lines so well that when the cops pulled over and got out of their unmarked car, black kids turned around, stepped to the walls or fences in front of them, spread their legs, raised their hands above their heads, and shook their coat sleeves down to expose their wrists for the handcuffs. And that was just for the cops to *talk* to them.

"They keep asking me why did my son run," Ms. Leisure told the *New York Times*. "If you are an African male, you will run."

Over-the-Rhine was Cincinnati's most dangerous neighborhood. There are Over-the-Rhines all across America, and I have walked a vast number of them, and they are all a bit different, and they are all the same. They are poor; minority, mostly black; desperate; riven by guns and drugs and fear. They are not, any of them, *just* dangerous: When I first began my time in this world, I was amazed to find quiet, lovingly kept streets cheek by jowl with what felt to me like Beirut. It was a first sign of what I now know well: These are places full of wonderful, amazing people. I have met the finest people I have ever met here. I have met young men who live carefully, consciously righteous lives, who make their parents proud, who navigate the lethal geography that is their daily life with breathtaking focus and courage. I have met parents who turn themselves inside out to protect their children and lift them up. I have met neighborhood elders who walk freely and cleanly through streets that would make, do make—I've seen it—seasoned law enforcement quake. I've met little old ladies who think nothing of squaring off with armed drug dealers. I've met armed drug dealers who listen to them. I've met older, wiser original gangsters, sick with what they've done, desperate to make up and give back, pleading, giving, negotiating, anything they can think of, to get the young men off the corners, stopping—sometimes with their own bodies—the looming violence. I have found, where nearly all outside have written it off, rich, living *community*. From the outside, from but a little distance, all looks lost; all is very much not, a point to which we will very much return. But the bad things that go on in these neighborhoods cast long shadows, and the bad things are profoundly, indescribably, obscenely awful.

I saw it first, more than twenty-five years ago, in Nickerson Gardens. Los Angeles public housing in Watts, black, and ground zero, near enough, to the crack epidemic. I've never been so scared in my life, before or since. I was there with two imposing black LAPD officers, and my lizard hindbrain knew instantly that if they were somehow magicked away all that would ever be found of me would be my bleached bones. It was the first time I saw what I have now seen all across this great nation of ours: young black men selling drugs to the idiot white folks who drive in from outside the neighborhood and drive out again, never even getting out of their cars; the child lookouts and runners; the burnt, leathery crack monsters, many of them women, hollowed out by the pipe; old men fawning over young men for a dollar or a rock; dirt and trash and empty bottles; the cold thug bravado of the groups of young men. Older women—always the older women—locked in their apartments, afraid to go outside, afraid to go to the store, afraid of stray gunshots, afraid for their children and grandchildren, afraid *of* their children and grandchildren, afraid afraid afraid.

I was in Nickerson Gardens by happenstance; it was not the kind of place people like me get to, otherwise. I had led a pretty standard privileged, well-educated, politically aware, socially conscious, white-guy life. My parents are easterners who'd moved to Michigan, outside Detroit, where my dad was a mechanical engineer with Chrysler; my mom had given up a chance to be Margaret Mead's personal assistant to marry him and have my older and younger sister and me. (At cocktail parties, asked what she did, she'd say, "I teach American civilization.")

When I was eight, in 1967, Detroit rioted. My family had a black cleaning lady, Selina Watson, who lived downtown and who was also our friend; she and my mother were close enough that Selina had dreams in which she came into my mother's bedroom and sat on her bed and said, Something's wrong with your mother, or David, or whatever that dream was about. My mother asked her to stop telling her about them, because they invariably came true—the next day my grandmother would have a stroke, or I got hit by a car—and my mother couldn't stand the waiting. A couple of days into the riots my mother called her and said, Should Chris come get you? Selina held the phone out the window so my mother could hear the tanks outside. Don't come anywhere near here, she said. We got out of Dodge, packed up the station wagon and left early for the family summer house in Maine.

Growing up, I raged against the Vietnam War, cheered when Nixon resigned, drove fifty-five to save gas, read Gandhi. Detroit, "Murder City," twenty miles away, got barely a thought. In college, at Swarthmore, outside Philadelphia, I helped organize an antiapartheid boycott. Black Chester, poor, dangerous, was four miles away. I did some tutoring there and lost interest.

In the early 1980s, I found myself in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. I wanted to be a writer and had a wonderful day job writing teaching cases for the Kennedy School faculty—real-life stories used to teach management and public policy, the way business schools use business cases. One of the Kennedy School's brightest lights, and somebody I would come to know as one of the smartest people I would ever meet, is a professor named Mark Moore. Mark is always doing a dozen things at once; among those things, he had the Kennedy School faculty chair in criminal justice and directed the Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management; he worked on juvenile justice, firearms, drugs and alcohol, violent offenders, corrections. He and a small circle of colleagues were launching a project on policing. Would I like to write the cases? We talked. He gave me some things to read and had me sit in on his team's planning for something they called the Executive Session on Policing. The general thrust was clear. Research and field experience had led them to think that the basic model of modern policing was bankrupt. They thought something better could be developed and were beginning a several-year undertaking to do that. There were new ideas in the air they were interested in, something called "community policing," something called "problem-oriented policing." Mark's team had already started cultivating police contacts who were putting them into practice in the field, and selected some first things they wanted to look at. Going and looking would be my job.

I said yes. It sounded interesting, I was quite enjoying Mark and his thinking, and the first trip was to London. I was in.

London was fun. The story was the London Metropolitan Police Force's response to the Brixton riot of 1981, a full-fledged antipolice race riot. I spent several days at New Scotland Yard hearing about how god-awful Brixton was, finally got there on my own, and discovered what felt to me like a vibrant multicultural neighborhood, fish-and-chip shops side by side with Jamaican jerk houses, reggae pulsing from shop doors. I went back and told the Met's commissioner, the wonderfully patrician Sir Kenneth Newman, that if I could make America's worst neighborhoods like Brixton, I'd get the Nobel Peace Prize. He chuckled and invited me to dinner in his private dining room, where we sat at a table that had come down from Admiral Nelson. I stayed off Russell Square, ate my first tandoori shrimp, drank real beer. Echo & the Bunnymen had "Bring on the Dancing Horses" on the radio, still one of my favorite songs. Brilliant.

The second trip was to Los Angeles.

That was different.

Freshmen philosophy classes get asked to debate, if you could go back in history and kill Hitler, would that be moral? Give me the guy who invented crack, a rusty bayonet, and a wayback machine, and get out of my way.

Los Angeles was *Blade Runner*. I know now that in most police forces a "man with a gun" call is a major deal, something rare; everybody in the area drops what they're doing and rushes to the scene. In Los Angeles, riding patrol, we were getting "man with an Uzi" from dispatch. *Regularly.* The week before I got there, somebody had put a rifle round through the driveshaft to the tail rotor of an LAPD helicopter and brought it down. "This is usually where I say, They shoot at us a lot," the air wing commander told me before I went up, "and you'll see muzzle flashes, but don't worry, they never hit us—but I can't say that anymore." The section of shaft, bullet hole drilled neatly through, was on display in the flight room.

South Central L.A. was surreal to someone like me, raised in the Midwest and on the East Coast. L.A. is low-rise; it goes out, not up. Single-family houses, nice lawns, Beach Boys sunshine, and whole neighborhoods with windows and doors behind iron bars. I watched, from the air, LAPD metro cars chasing gangbangers through the alleys that ran behind the houses. A husband in one of the drug areas hid his wife under a rug in his back seat when he left home; if both of them were seen leaving, their house would be scavenged clean before they returned. It was the first time I heard the term "rock house"—someplace where anybody could wander up, knock on the door, and buy rock cocaine—crack. When I headed west to L.A., the *New York Times* was just starting to write about this new drug called crack. In L.A., it was *on*.

I went to Nickerson Gardens because LAPD was trying a new foot-patrol experiment to see if the same officers, in the same area, getting to know the people and local action, could make a difference. The place is huge, almost sixty acres, a small town of low-rise stucco-and-concrete townhouse apartments, sun-bleached and pale. I didn't know it then, but I was just across the line from Compton, which some think really was ground zero for crack. It could truly have been the most dangerous place in America, on that particular day. I spent the day walking with the two of them. One was tough and compact, didn't say much, ranged out like a hunting dog working the trail for game: check this door, a look around the corner, double back for a word with that group of young men, flick forward again. Every once in a while he'd slide by for a quick word with his partner, off again. I stayed with the partner—big, talkative, friendly. He was a magnet for the little kids; they flocked, he joked, handed out baseball cards. Stopped and talked to the older women. Nodded to the young men, clustered, watchful, all sinew and hard eyes.

All the day, he schooled me. It was like walking with a field biologist who knows every root and branch and bird and butterfly; you're not really in the same forest they are. The cars come in from that way, see the kid walking up to the window, he's serving them. Those old men sitting at the card table, they're watching the heroin stash, it's buried over there, the dealers pay them off. We have to watch those traffic lights at rush hour, all the cars get ripped off. That guy, he's a heroin junkie, old, they can last forever if they keep eating, it's like the heroin preserves them; crack, though, it burns them up fast. I don't think I ever got more than eighteen inches from him. If you could have seen the fear and tension—*fear-vision goggles*—everything would have glowed white-hot. The *buildings* would have glowed. It was like watching time-lapse photography, the gorgeous flower blooming, the clouds scudding over, but what was unfolding was the end of the world. You could *see* it.

It was making a difference, what they were doing. As bad as it was, it had recently been a whole lot worse. All day long, as we walked and stopped, older black women said, thank God you're here. I can come outside again.

I felt like I had to do something. I took the two of them to dinner. I felt like I had to say something. Thank you, I told them, awkwardly. I know I didn't belong there. Thank you for taking care of me. The quiet one started to laugh. I was humiliated. No, you don't get it, he said. It's not you, I'm not laughing at you. Those kids who were coming up all day long? To get the baseball cards? The dealers were sending them. They wanted to know who you were. They never see a white guy in a suit. So all day long, out there, what I was telling people? *Fed.* You've done us a big favor. Things are going to be really quiet for a couple of weeks.

I had an absolutely visceral response to Nickerson Gardens. It was not reasoned, not moral, not mediated. It was

This is not okay. People should not have to live like this. This is wrong.

Somebody needs to do something.

It seized me in a way none of my other writing jobs had. I did more fieldwork for Mark Moore. Tampa, where I turned a corner in College Hill in my rental car and, for the first time, had a teenager on a banana-seat bicycle cruise by and check me out. Drug market lookout. First time of many. Went through my first door: Form up at dawn under an overpass, coffee and shuffling feet, entry briefing, raid vehicles streaming to the house, *out out out* blast through the door *police police police down down everybody down* I'm maybe the fifth through, cops coursing through the side rooms *clear clear* a man and a woman sitting cuffed against the wall in the living room paralyzed in shock. Not long after, I sat at Tampa police headquarters with the narcotics commander while he worked with the feds to make sure that the gram of marijuana—a joint, maybe a sample—the postal inspectors had just found in a letter made it into the house of the addressee before they took it, so he could seize the house. “People think I’m in the drug business,” he said. “I’m not. I’m in the take-everything-you-own business.” The command staff all drove luxury cars seized from dealers.

In Houston, where a whole apartment complex called Link Valley had been taken over, the drug traffic was so heavy dealers used light wands to direct it, like airline ground crews. Dealers drove off landlords by main force, there were six homicides in one year, jonesing buyers broke into sixty-six-year-old Gloria Pastor’s home in an adjoining neighborhood, robbed it, killed her. On to East New York, in Brooklyn, where whole precincts were taken over by dealers and you could buy kilos of powder without getting out of your car. The Dominicans run the weight trade, my DEA guides said, they’re tough, drove the Colombians out. Entire apartment buildings gone, each unit a stash house or a cook room, dealers stringing wires from the rear windows so they could slide out the back when the cops came in the front. I sat in a Hispanic shopkeeper’s little office. We need *big black cops*, she said, cops these guys will *listen* to. They’ve got to turn the cops *loose*. My daughter can’t walk down the street. Some of the cops turned themselves loose: One of them crimped a wire, staged an entry, went in a front door, dealer goes out the back window, *splat*. I walked Anacostia in southeast Washington D.C., gunshot survivors, young men with canes and walkers—leg injuries, spinal-cord injuries, the paraplegics and quadraplegics don’t get out so much—thick on the sidewalk. Our nation’s capital. Colostomy bags, if you could see them. Lots and lots of colostomy bags, this world. There were craters in the buildings where they’d taken rounds.

I hit drug markets all over the country, flew to wonderful cities and dove into their worst corners, parallel worlds of violence and fear and despair, became a connoisseur of drug markets. It’s becoming fashionable these days to say that crack sparked a “moral panic”: that it was never really that bad, that the public and political and law enforcement response was just a fevered overreaction. The argument goes something like this. Crack is just cocaine, pharmacologically; smoking it makes it hit harder and sharper, but otherwise, no big difference. Survey work shows that whites and blacks both use and sell cocaine in roughly equal numbers, and nobody started treating white neighborhoods like battle zones, so obviously that's just racism. The worst media excesses—one hit turns ordinary people into hopeless addicts, crack babies are ruined for life—turned out not to be true. The political bidding war to penalize crack was misbegotten—college basketball star Len Bias, whose cocaine-overdose death two days after being drafted by the Boston Celtics in 1986 helped drive Congress to enact, among other things, the notorious federal crack/powder disparity, actually died from using powder, not crack—and hugely disproportionate, given that crack was objectively not all that serious. Cocaine was slick when Hollywood hipsters snorted it, a demon drug when black kids smoked it. Drug warriors knowingly exaggerated its dangers; politicians took advantage for their own ends. The fever, hypocrisy, and racism has brought us where we are today, with black neighborhoods on lockdown and black drug users swelling the prisons. Crack was just never that big a deal.

There's a very strong case to be made for each of those predicates. As for the conclusion, it's nice to have a scholarly background; it gives one a subtle and refined perspective to bring to bear on empirical claims. The correct, judicious, judgment to be rendered in this case is

Bullshit.

Crack blew through America's poor black neighborhoods like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse had traded their steeds for supercharged bulldozers. It is now genuinely true, I think, that you had to be there. The moral panic crowd wishes all the evidence away: The cops aren't to be trusted, so their views don't count; the arrests were biased, so the numbers don't count; the newspaper reporters spun anecdotes, not systematic research, so their stories don't count; the tales of horror were overblown and hysterical, so they don't count. I was there. I've been there ever since. There are out-of-control drug markets all over the country; they're spreading. When I started it was all core urban stuff, but not anymore: It's been moving into the small towns for years. More than anything else, the moral panic nonsense misses the mark because it's all about *use*. Crack use, drug use, has never been the real drug problem.

Crack *markets*, drug *markets*, are the problem. I'd rather be in a crack market than be, say, held at gunpoint, or have boiling oil poured on me. Short of that, things don't get much worse.

I wrote it all up, huddled with Mark and his crew, sat in on his Executive Session, got to know the chiefs of police of L.A. and New York and Houston; Ed Meese, attorney general of the United States; Herman Goldstein, the father of problem-oriented policing; George Kelling, the father of broken-windows policing, other top academics nationally; Frank Hartmann, the executive director of the Program in Criminal Justice and genius moderator for the Executive Sessions; amazing law enforcement people from England and Australia. There was reason, real reason, to be hopeful. The core idea behind the new policing was that there were fundamentally more effective ways to go after important crime problems. The Kennedy School Executive Session, and police scholars nationally, worked out a whole architecture to retool policing in accordance with the new "community" and "problem-oriented" ideas. The police could work with new partners, bring different resources to bear from neighborhoods and businesses and city government. They could be analytic about their work, use tools other than arrest, do more than just chase calls and take reports. The future was visible. It won't happen overnight, was the thought. Give it, oh, five years.

The substance, the details, don't matter. It didn't take. American policing was not transformed. Whatever the new ideas' potential, it simply was not realized. There were isolated success stories on the street; you could see it really was possible to do things differently. There were a few departments that came pretty close to actually redesigning themselves. But it wasn't enough. Nobody went all the way. Most departments, most of the time, continued to do what they'd always done: drive around in cars, answer 911 calls, investigate crimes after they'd already happened. I watched from the sidelines in increasing desperation.

Meanwhile, crack had lit the fuse of America's youth-homicide epidemic, and the violence was spiking. Homicide, anywhere, everywhere, is overwhelmingly about young men. In America, homicide is overwhelmingly about poor young black men, and overwhelmingly about poor young black men and handguns. Criminologists stratify populations: A standard move is to look at young men's high-risk years, about eighteen to twenty-four. Before crack, things were getting better. The homicide victimization rate for eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old blacks had actually been *declining*, from about 97 per 100,000 population in 1980—the tail end of the heroin epidemic—to about 68 per 100,000 in 1984. Then, beginning in 1985, it skyrocketed, to over 180 per 100,000 in 1993: an increase of more than *250 percent*. (Homicide deaths among eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old whites went from 16.2 per 100,000 to 17.2 per 100,000.) There were headlines every day: young black men killing each other over drug turf, over sneakers, over a hard look—*mean mugging*—over nothing at all.

But that's over, of course. Everybody knows crime is down these days, it's a national success story. America's homicide rate hit almost 10 per 100,000 in the peak years; it's now about half that. But not for black men. Black men are dying, overwhelmingly by gunshot, at a horrendous pace. In 2005, black men aged eighteen to twenty-four were murdered at a rate of 102 per 100,000 (white men of the same age: 12.2 per 100,000). Recent data show that, even as homicide overall continues to decline, black men are dying *more*. Between 2000 and 2007, the gun homicide rate for black men aged fourteen to seventeen went up 40 percent; eighteen to twenty-four, up 18 percent; twenty-five and over, up almost 27 percent. And it's not just the big cities anymore. It's moving to the small cities, the towns, places that never dreamt they'd be dealing with this. The biggest increase in black killing, fourteen-to-twenty-four-year-old men from 2000 to 2007, was in cities between fifty and a hundred thousand: up a full third. Whites far outnumber blacks in the population, but the black homicide rate is so high that there are, in absolute numbers, more bodies: over 2,200 black men eighteen to twenty-four in 2005, against about 1,400 whites. Almost another four hundred between fourteen and seventeen.

It's just about the death toll for the World Trade Center attacks. *Every year*.

The killing is overwhelmingly concentrated in America's Over-the-Rhines: poor, desperate, black neighborhoods in big, medium, small cities. These are communities crafting new folkways for violent death, where shops sell "his picture here" memorial T-shirts—bring in a photograph, they'll print them up for you—where dead men's street names—RIP G-MONEY, KILLA—are spray-painted on walls, where shrines to the murdered—teddy bears, liquor bottles, photographs, plastic guns, "never forget" cards—dot the streets, where young men tattoo the names of their dead on forearms and fingers. There are no boundaries any longer, no sacred ground. At funeral services, young men surge in and out of church, seething, while women beg them to forgo retaliation. Security services redirect processions based on intelligence about victims' rivals. It doesn't always work. Clarence Glover, House of Glover Funeral Services, a little north of Over-the-Rhine—on the edge of Avondale, another hot neighborhood—has dodged bullets at burials.

Joanne Jaffe is a friend and colleague. She runs the NYPD housing police and she's working with young offenders who live in public housing in Brooklyn. Not long ago she showed me a portfolio of Facebook pages, RIP Facebook pages, RIP Facebook pages dated 2011 as I write this a few days into the new year. Yeah, I said, I know. I've been seeing it for years, families and friends honoring their dead. No, she said, you don't get it. These kids are *alive*. They're composing them *themselves*. They don't expect to live out the year. They're getting their affairs in order.

Young black men, every one.

The facts on the ground, the facts in the hot neighborhoods, are staggering. Our normal analysis, our normal discourse, is about the nation, about cities. We're in a long crime decline nationally; New York City, after more than fifteen years of falling homicide, had a small increase in 2010. That frame, those facts, those numbers, are real. They miss the point entirely. "Nobody lives in the nation," my colleague John Klofas at the Rochester Institute of Technology says. "They live in neighborhoods." David Cay Johnston is a Pulitzer Prize–winning former *New York Times* reporter, renowned for his work on economic inequality in America. Late in 2010, he wrote a piece about how he'd been getting his hair cut and the guy in the chair next to him started going on about how crime was out of control. It's not, Johnston said. It's all just lurid, cheap reporting. The country is way, way safer than it used to be. "Crime isn't running wild," Johnston wrote. Klofas wrote him a letter. I know your work, and really admire it, he said. "I oversimplify, but the plight of the middle class, the gap between rich and poor and the delusions of economic democracy in this country are enormously troublesome to me. But I must admit I am surprised that you argue such issues so eloquently regarding the economy but you don't seem to appreciate that the same general argument applies to crime. The rich have gotten richer and safer but neither can be said for the nation's urban poor." He showed Johnston his research: that the homicide rate for young black men in the high-crime area of Rochester, New York, a crescent of Over-the-Rhine-style neighborhoods, was *520* per 100,000. The math means that more than one in two hundred are murdered every year.

That small increase in New York City's homicides in 2010? Driven entirely by black dead, mostly young black men. White deaths were down 27 percent, black deaths up 31 percent. Young black men fifteen to twenty-nine were 3 percent of the city, a full third of the murdered.

Nickerson Gardens made this my world.

Ten years after I stood there in Watts, I grew deeply, desperately frustrated: tired of sitting on the sidelines watching, tired of researching and writing, tired of saying what other people should do. I went into the field. Not, this time, as an observer. I wanted to *do* something. I wanted to help, though I had no real idea how. I found, from the very beginning, a gifted, dedicated, and still-growing band of partners. We've been at it now for nearly twenty years, in cities all across America. And we've gotten somewhere.

It has not been linear, clear, direct. It has been opaque, confusing, deeply painful. I have seen pieces of a puzzle, thought I saw a whole, found out I was wrong, doubled back, looked elsewhere, found new pieces. I have found myself navigating a landscape littered with preconception, prejudice, myth, misunderstanding: my own not least of all. I have gone from feeling, at least from time to time, pretty damned smart, to feeling deeply, profoundly humble and not infrequently ashamed. Looking back from where I stand now, I can see that nearly everything important was there to be seen, clearly visible, from the beginning, had I the wit to see it. I didn't. Looking back from where I stand now, I can see how essentially simple the answers are, how basic. I couldn't see it. But I, we, saw some things, we did some things, we kept pushing, we saw other things that led to still other things. And we have arrived at a place where we know something important.

We know what we need to know, now, to fix it.

We're not done; there's more to do, understand, figure out. Much more. It's all a work in progress. But we know enough to act, *now*. We do not have to live with the death, and the hatred, and the gunshot survivors who walk the streets with their canes and colostomy bags, and the young men who say matter-of-factly that they expect to be dead before they see twenty-five, and the warrior-priest cops who go through door after door after door and it never changes, and whole communities of black men going to prison, and whole communities that are unable to get anywhere on anything of substance because people are afraid to go outside, and poisoned relations between those who need each other the most. We do not have to go on like this. We once locked crazy people in stone buildings and chained them to walls; we look back at that now and say, What were they thinking? They did that? We can get there. We can make our way to a place where we look back at 2.2 million Americans in prison and say, What were they thinking? They did that?

The core of the problem, the key to the way out, lies in community, in communities. We have found our way, my partners and I, to strategies, operations. We have approaches to particular crime problems, we can teach them to you if you want to learn them, we have implementation guides and best-practice handbooks and research methods to support them and evaluations that gauge their impact. The real problem, though, is not in our currently ineffective strategies, and the answer to the problem is not just to substitute new strategies for the old ones. The real—the deep—problem is what happens between communities, and how that generates the appalling situation on the ground: the communities that look at each other and say, This is *your* fault; the communities that see each other as toxic and malevolent; the communities that cannot imagine working together for a common purpose; the communities that do not understand how profoundly they want the same things; the communities that do not see how they are backing each other, and themselves, into corners none chose, none wants. To see what's really going on, we have to see this. To truly change things, these communities must change the way they see each other, treat each other, act with and upon each other.

They can. Given the right opportunity, they will. We know that now.

We have three communities, at core, here.

First community.

Law enforcement.

The kind of relentless law enforcement that tagged Timothy Thomas with twenty-one violations and fourteen warrants is intended to save lives, to protect neighborhoods, to bring order to the streets. I have spent my adult life with the men and women who do the work, and I know this to be true. I've no time for the easy armchair cant that says this is all about profiling and racism and bias in the criminal justice system. It simply is not so. Nobody who has ever actually been on these streets could believe it for a moment. There is disparate treatment in law enforcement, no question, but that is not what is driving the problem. We cannot wish this away. Ask any defense attorney, who will tell you that all her clients are guilty. Police and prosecutors and probation and parole and all the rest focus on these neighborhoods because this is where the killing and dying is happening, and because the people living in Over-the-Rhine have the same right to peace and tranquility as those living nearby in safe and prosperous Mt. Adams. The smug notion that there is no problem here, or that this is all a moral panic, or that the problem with high-crime communities is the institutional racism of the criminal justice system, is a crock. The idea that the problem of America's Over-the-Rhines is institutional racism *is* institutional racism. Tell it to the mothers and fathers and loved ones of all the young black men who will die in Cincinnati if we don't do something real about all this. They are not being killed by the cops. They are being killed by each other. Black Americans are about a seventh of America. They do about half America's killing and half America's violent dying—young men, most of both—and it is the Over-the-Rhines that overwhelmingly produce the killers and the killed. After nearly fifty years of American progress on civil rights, with an American black middle class growing and flourishing, with a black man in the White House, poor black neighborhoods all across America burn white-hot.

If police were not focusing on these neighborhoods, they'd deserve to be hung from lampposts. The problem is that our response to the crime has become part of what is sustaining it. We are operating with the best of intentions, at least at the level where law enforcement actually takes place. I have worked alongside these police officers and prosecutors and probation and parole officers and federal agents for twenty-five years now; I am proud to call many of them my closest friends. They care deeply about the communities they are trying to protect, and I will tell you that they are doing their best.

Which does not change that we are destroying the village in order to save it. America has become a place where one in three black men will serve a felony prison sentence. One in nine between ages twenty and thirty-four is in prison *right now*. In Baltimore, where they've done the math, and many other places where they haven't, *half* of all young adult black men are in prison, in jail, on parole, or on probation. Most of those arrested, prosecuted, jailed, imprisoned, on probation, and on parole come from and return to the poor, hot-spot neighborhoods where the drugs, crime, and violence are also worst. In these places, most of the men can have criminal records. Felons, even those committed to turning their lives around, are deeply, permanently damaged. Nearly none will ever get a good job; permanently hobbled from advancement, they have little reason to invest in education and training; they are less likely to marry; they are less able to take care of their loved ones; many of them go to prison with children and families they leave behind and then return to, often to leave behind again, each step of which is profoundly disruptive; they have less to offer their communities; their communities mean less to them. Short of actual arrest and imprisonment, there is the grinding, intrusive policing endured by many poor black communities, the kind of policing that saddled Timothy Thomas with his twenty-one violations, the kind of policing that makes citizens in these neighborhoods think, at best, that the police are not on their side, and at worst that they are a race enemy. We are systematically injuring one of America's peoples. And we need to own that this is a *choice* that we are making. Law enforcement is not the tide or the weather. It does not just happen. We are doing this because we have *decided* to.

And we need to own an even harder truth: We have so decided, in considerable part, because law enforcement has in general written these communities off. There is a powerful conventional wisdom in the law enforcement circles I live in: that these communities are at heart uncaring, complicit, corrupt, destroyed. Nobody cares about the crime, the law enforcement narrative goes, or they'd raise their kids right, get them to finish school, have them work entry-level jobs—like I did, like my kids do—instead of working the corners. They don't care about the violence; nobody will even tell us who the shooters are. (Robert Tate, seventeen, was shot not long ago on the west side of Chicago. A police officer asked him if he knew who did it. "Yes," said Tate, "but I ain't telling you shit," and died.) Nobody cares about the drugs because everybody's living off drug money. That doesn't mean we don't do everything we can to keep people alive, to keep their streets safe, to protect, especially, the kids and the elders. But all we can do is occupy them, stop everybody, arrest everybody we can.

As long as this is how law enforcement sees the neighborhoods, they will continue to occupy them, stop everybody, arrest everybody, send all the men to prison.

There's a lot to say about this, but the most important thing is simple. It's wrong.

The second important community is the community in even the poorest, hardest-hit black neighborhoods. It's vital, caring, resourceful; it wants what any community wants: to be safe, to prosper, for its sons and daughters to prosper. It's not happening. It's not safe, and they're not prospering. The community looks around itself, at the poverty, the violence, the drugs, and asks, why? And it has an answer. Many in the black community believe that this is *all* happening because we—the outsiders, the cops, the white folks, the powerful—*want* it to happen. All of it: the drugs, the killing, the destruction, all of it. The day after I stood shocked in Nickerson Gardens, I called on a seasoned, weary, Watts community organizer. A former Black Panther, he had devoted his life to bootstrapping black neighborhoods out of squalor and despair. And we were finally getting somewhere, he said. We had businesses going, single mothers in their own homes, paying off their mortgages. We were making it. And the government couldn't stand it, so they brought this crack in, and now all those mothers are on the street chasing the pipe.

It has taken me most of my life to really hear what he said that day. That day, and long after, my mind simply shut it out: crazy talk. I'm white. This is part of the problem here: White folks hear this all the time, but they do not really hear it. I heard it, eventually. I watched with fascination the white response during the 2008 presidential campaign to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's now-famous "God damn America" screed. *This is what he was talking about.* The larger excerpt from his 2003 sermon is

> The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people.

This is just conventional wisdom in the neighborhoods I work in: The government brings the drugs in so they can put our kids in jail so the cops will have work and the cracker prison guards upstate can make union wages. My parents, who are smart, empathetic, informed people, and I got into it about Wright. They thought he was nuts. Wright's talk was endlessly reported and discussed; I saw no reference whatsoever, in any of it, to what I know to be true: *Many* black Americans believe what Rev. Wright believes. In some communities, *most* black Americans believe what Rev. Wright believes. Part of this book is about an entirely different way of dealing with drugs and drug markets, *designed* to keep people out of prison. We have worked these ideas in Providence, Rhode Island, and in many other communities. When I first raised them with Dennis Langley, black head of the Providence chapter of the National Urban League, he dismissed the idea immediately. The police will never go along with it, he said. Are you telling me the government couldn't keep the drugs out of the country if it wanted to? The *point* of the drugs is to put our kids in prison.

If you believe that, then that makes the police, and the larger community they represent, a race enemy. If the police are a race enemy, you can't work with them. Can't go to them when you need help. Can't make common cause on the most dire of neighborhood problems. You're about to die, can't tell them who shot you. As long as the community sees the police, the government, as a race enemy, there will be no rightful place for law. There can be no working together, no partnership, no common purpose.

There's a lot to say about this, but the most important thing is simple. It's wrong.

Third community.

The community of the streets.

Nearly all of the worst violence and crime in America's most troubled neighborhoods is driven by a small, superheated world of gangs and drug crews and drug markets. It is a world with its own rules, its own standards, its own understandings. It *is* a community, make no mistake; it is a community where men will kill for their brothers, die for their brothers, where being a thug is a good and honorable thing, where *thug love* means having your brothers' backs, no matter what the cost. It is a world in which young men stand against a powerful, malevolent world and say to themselves and to each other, Prison's no big thing; I'm going to be dead by the time I'm twenty-five, so nothing really matters; if a man is disrespected, he has to return violence or he's not a man; the enemy of my friend is my enemy; I'm a victim, so I'm justified in what I do.

It is a world that believes that it acts with righteousness. It is a world that believes that the community around it does not care, or is complicit, or is supportive. It is a world that believes that the police hate it and are motivated by racism and personal animosity.

If you believe that, then you're going to shoot other young men just like you for disrespecting you. That's going to go right sometimes, you're going to kill them, and the pain of their mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers is going to burn like fire. That's going to go wrong sometimes, you're going to kill wonderful young schoolgirls sitting on their porches or doing their homework in their bedrooms, and the pain is going to be even worse. You have a problem, you're not going to go to the police, your friends aren't going to let you go to the police, you're going to handle it yourself. You're going to take community silence about what you're doing as approval. You're going to do crime and go to prison over and over and over again. You're going to leave behind your friends, family, loved ones, grieving your death, grieving your absence. You're going to be part of making killing, dying, prison, *normal*. You're going to justify the worst notions of the outside: that you're remorseless, an animal, a sociopath.

As long as the community of the streets sees itself as righteous and justified, the killing will continue. As long as the community of the streets sees its own neighborhoods as approving, it will continue. As long as the streets see the police as racist and hateful, it will continue.

There's a lot to say about this, but the most important thing is simple. It's wrong.

It's *all* wrong. *This* is all wrong.

The government is not conspiring to destroy the community, the police are not uncaring, oppressive, racist. The community does not like the drugs and violence. Gang members and drug dealers don't want to die, don't want to go to prison, don't want—nearly any of them—to shoot people. It's *not true*.

To the contrary. Spend time, real time, with cops. Spend time, real time, with angry communities. Spend time, real time, with gang members and drug dealers. They are, none of them, what they seem to be from the outside. They are, none of them, their stereotypes. They are, all of them, in their own ways, strong and aspirational and resilient. They are, all of them, dealing as best they can with a world they did not make. They are all doing profoundly destructive things without fully understanding what they do. There is, on all sides, malice, craziness, and evil. But not much, it turns out, not much at all. There is, on all sides, a deep reservoir of core human decency. (Yes, for those of you shaking your heads and about to put this book down, because you cannot believe this is true of the cops, or the neighborhoods, or the gangbangers: truly. Bear with me. You'll see.)

This is what is at the heart of America's shame of violent death and mass incarceration and unspeakable community fear and chaos. These understandings and misunderstandings and the awful stereotypes they foster and reinforce, and the awful places into which they push ourselves and each other. The awful truth is that they are *understandable*, each and every one; they make perfect sense, each from their own perspective. One of the truest learnings of my nearly thirty years with cops and thugs and desperate black neighborhoods has been the slow—far, far too slow—dawning, the appalled gradual realization, of just how perfectly sensible they are, how reasonable they are. Come to understand each world, even the thug world, and they're not crazy at all, they make sense, they're *rational*. But they're wrong, these beliefs. They're wrong, and they're terrible, and they make each community look and act badly, and the gulf widens.

Deal with them, however, and something nearly magical happens. Humanity emerges, common ground appears, common interests manifest, common sense can finally prevail.

We can deal with them. It sounds too good to be true, but it's not. We *are* dealing with them, all over the country. This is *real*. It is *happening*. It is within our grasp. It works. We can *do* this.

And we can deal with the way in which all of this is *saturated* in race. Our real racial history, that has brought us where we are. The understandings, and especially the misunderstandings, that shape law enforcement's view of dangerous black neighborhoods. The understandings, and especially the misunderstandings, that shape those neighborhoods' view of the police. The understandings, and especially the misunderstandings, that shape law enforcement's and neighborhoods' views of the streets. The understandings, and especially the misunderstandings, that shape the streets' views of law enforcement. The dreadful behavior, by all parties, that follows. The ways in which we are all fanning the flames. The ways in which our very real, our dreadfully hard-won, our honorable progress on race in America has left untouched a national disgrace of violence, fear, alienation, and imprisonment. The ways in which that national disgrace is not open to the old remedies of racial justice, in which the old remedies of racial justice can in fact make the new problem harder to see. The ways in which different remedies are immediately before us, in our grasp. We can see it, we can face it, and we can move through it and beyond.

It doesn't change, fix, everything. We still have huge work to do on the other side. I'm a born and bred root causer, came up believing in fixing the economy, fixing education, supporting families, eradicating racism: Heal the community and the crime will take care of itself. That notion didn't survive the first five minutes in Nickerson Gardens. We can't do economic development when people are afraid to go outside, can't fix education when the corner boys get all the girls and face the other boys on their way to school, can't support families whose fathers are all locked up, can't eradicate racism when the neighborhoods and world outside are both fulfilling each other's worst prejudices. Deal with those things, and we have a chance to do the more important, deeper work.

Other way around, forget it.

The Rev. Wright was wrong. America need not be, should not be, damned. We can redeem ourselves. We just can't do it the way we've been trying to do it. We have to do something different.

I got the call from Cincinnati in the fall of 2006. The city had crumbled in the wake of the riot Timothy Thomas's killing had triggered. The Cincinnati Police Department knew it couldn't continue as before; it wasn't sure what else to do. In Over-the-Rhine and other hot neighborhoods, the police drew back. Gunfire picked up. Drug dealing became hotter and even more brazen. On the next to last day of 2001, the year of the riot, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* published a map of gunshot victims in the city. There had been sixty-one homicides in the city—up from forty the year before. There had been 107 shootings since April 13, after the riot quieted. The single largest number, twenty-two, was in Over-the-Rhine. It was nearly double that of the next most active neighborhood.

The body count continued to climb.

2002, sixty-six.

2003, seventy-five.

2004, sixty-eight.

2005, seventy-nine. And over *1,600* gunshot woundings.

The city had had enough. In April of 2006, under newly elected mayor Mark Mallory, the police department returned to what was, in effect, pre-riot operations. It included a crackdown in Over-the-Rhine that generated over a thousand arrests in a month. More than seven hundred were for Timothy Thomas–style misdemeanor offenses. The citywide sweep eventually totaled some 2,600 arrests.

It didn't work. 2006 would end with eighty-nine homicides, more than double than before the riot, and a historic peak for the city.

Shootings of *children* went up 300 percent.

Desperately watching was Dr. Victor Garcia, a black pediatric trauma surgeon at Cincinnati's Children's Hospital. I'd never met him; he'd shown up in my inbox several years earlier, and we'd written and spoken from time to time. I knew his extraordinary fervor only long-distance. Many of Cincinnati's surging number of gunshot kids came across his operating table. He'd been hounding the city, the state. I'm a doctor, a scientist, I've done my homework, he told anybody who would listen. Evidence matters here. There's something out there that works. We *must* do this. The crisis in the city finally got him his hearing. In late 2006, I found myself speaking to Mayor Mallory from my New York office at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Mallory said to me, is this true? This thing that I've been hearing about, it will really bring the killing down?

Yes, I said. And keep people out of prison, and heal the wounds between your police and your community.

We know how to do this.