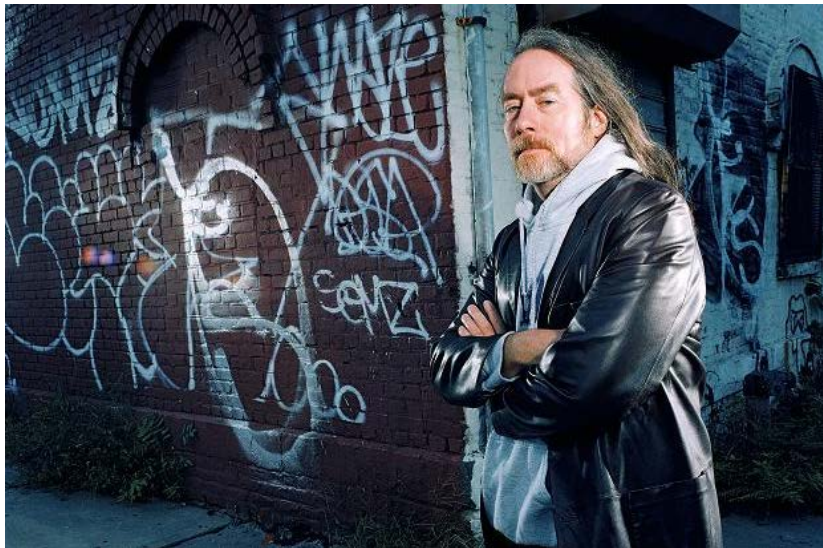


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The gang buster



Giles Whittell

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David Kennedy's unusual methods for tackling gang violence are having startling results in American cities. Now, he is bringing them to Britain

Small talk with Professor David Kennedy can have a bit of an edge.

"Did you know," he says, as we sit down for lunch a few blocks from Lake Michigan, where he is on a book tour, "that Glasgow is the world centre of facial reconstruction surgery?"

He explains that this rare medical specialism – for a city – is a direct result of the way its teenagers go at each other's heads and throats with knives, and have done for decades. Until recently it was one of the most violent places in Europe; it had to learn how to patch up its own.

Kennedy is more of an expert on gun violence than knife violence, but he is very confident that the two have much in common. "It doesn't matter that much whether people are shooting each other or hacking each other up with machetes the way they are in Glasgow," he says. If you want them to stop, he continues, you need to tell them more or less the same thing.

By this time he has ordered a steak that comes with a knife the size of a dagger, but Kennedy's story really needs no emphasis. It began nearly 30 years ago, when he was sent to London by Harvard to write a case study on Britain's response to the 1981 Brixton riots. He enjoyed the trip. "London was fun," he writes in a new book, *Don't Shoot – One Man, a Street Fellowship and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*. He mooched around the streets off Brixton Road and Coldharbour Lane, unintimidated by the drug dealers and soaking up what seemed to him a reasonable example of multiculturalism in action. He told the Met Commissioner at the time, Sir Kenneth Newman: "If I could make America's worst neighbourhoods like Brixton, I'd get the Nobel Peace Prize."

Kennedy, 52, is the serious son of serious parents who were "very serious about getting things done". His father was an engineer with Chrysler. His mother passed up the chance of a career in anthropology to raise David and his two sisters in Michigan, where he enjoyed listening to English folk rock and psychedelic music from the Sixties and Seventies that he says would have appalled his serious parents had they known about it. As a young man, drawn into questions of crime and punishment at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government (no connection), he hitchhiked all over the United States and hoped to write a book on zoo design.

His shoulder-length hair is now mostly grey, but still convenient for identification purposes. You don't have to know him to spot him in a hotel lobby. Some say he looks like Jesus. John Seabrook wrote in *The New Yorker* that there was something of the high plains drifter about him, and he doesn't seem to mind; his colleagues gave him a cowboy hat when they read that.

Kennedy has changed the world, or a big chunk of it. It is not hard to argue that he actually deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. He has long ago given up a cherished dream of making his living as a literary nonfiction writer. Instead he has devoted himself to ending gun crime in the face of obstacles that included, and in some places still include, scornful police, suspicious social workers, unscrupulous rivals, unreachable gang members and a general numbed acceptance that gun casualties on a scale seldom seen outside war zones, in scores of hollowed-out American cities,

David Kennedy
Martha Camarillo

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were somehow to be endured, were in an awful sense the price of freedom.

Eleven weeks ago the streets of Tottenham lit up and Kennedy's work came full circle. As the worst British riots in a generation spread across London and the country, David Cameron denounced them in public as an expression of common criminality. In private, he put the word out that he needed answers to why this had happened and how to stop it happening again. In Glasgow, a police intelligence analyst named Karen McCluskey had already been learning from Kennedy how to neutralise gang violence, and it was working. She got a call from Downing Street. In Los Angeles, police chief Bill Bratton had based many of his most successful gang-control efforts on Kennedy's work. He got the call, too, and is now an adviser to the Government. He might even have taken over the Met had Theresa May not insisted that London's top cop be a British citizen.

Did Kennedy get a call? He goes coy all of a sudden. "There has been a conversation in the Met and at the Home Office for some time about whether these approaches can be adapted to the UK," he says.

So what's his secret? It's actually not a secret, just a breakthrough in crime reduction that has proved to be transferable within and beyond the US, and which Kennedy is confident can crack urban violence in London if only the police can be persuaded to go along with it. It has many moving parts, but one in particular has the capacity to change lives at a stroke, redeem men dismissed as sociopaths and reduce their elders to stunned silence and streaming tears. They call it the call-in.

For a successful call-in, police and criminologists like Kennedy have to start by spending weeks if not months identifying the tiny number (it is always tiny) of violent young men (they are always men) responsible for most of the gun and drug-related crime in whichever city they are trying to help. Social workers have to be enlisted to offer assistance.

Carefully selected members of the gang's traumatised community have to be found to bear witness to the trauma with the maximum chance of penetrating the gang members' hard protective shell of pretending not to care. Then a secure venue is found. The performance is scripted and rehearsed down to the last detail, and the invitations go out.

One invitation hand-delivered in May 2004 to 12 drug dealers by a three-man team on behalf of Police Chief Jim Fealy of High Point, North Carolina, opened thus: "As Chief of Police... I am writing to let you know that your activities have come to my attention. Specifically, I know that you are involved in selling drugs on the street. You have been identified as a street-level drug dealer after an extensive undercover campaign in the West End Area. I want to invite you to a meeting on May 18, 2004, at 6pm at the Police Department. You will not be arrested. This is not a trick."

A call-in is not a trick, but it can deliver a little bit of magic. The homework is crucial, because it lets the invitees know they have been watched and it provides the basis for prosecutions that have to follow if the message doesn't get through.

Kennedy gives an example from Rochester, New York. After some generic warnings from senior police, "These two particular officers who got very good at this would say, 'Oh, and John, let your brother know we've got his pictures.' And that turned out to mean photographs from a narcotics raid on a crack house a couple of weeks ago – photographs of this guy's crew and his brother with a bunch of their fellow gang members posing with piles of their drugs and guns, which these guys do. They put them on their Facebook pages now..."

"What was being signalled was: we know who you are... and if it comes to the point that we have to put together a conspiracy case against all of you, that's the stuff that's going to go into the federal indictment. And these guys would almost literally go into shock."

The unambiguous threat of serious time tended to focus minds, Kennedy found. But there had to be people in the room who could inspire respect as well as fear. People like Carla McNeil, who stood up in front of 60 hard-boiled probationers in a county courtroom in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine district in 2007 and told them what it felt like to be bereaved. Six years earlier McNeil's 17-year-old son, Jeremy, had survived high school and was due in two weeks to leave Cincinnati to train as a computer technician in safe Indianapolis. One day he went out and didn't come back. His body was found in a skip, so badly decomposed that his mother was not allowed to view it.

Kennedy says of the probationers: "These are guys who say it's part of their street code, that they know they're going to get killed. They don't care that they're going to get killed. And Carla said to them, 'This is what you did to us when Jeremy was killed: it destroyed me, it destroyed his brothers and sisters, it destroyed our family. We're still broken, we're never going to be the same, and if you actually let yourself get killed your mother's going to be standing here feeling like this.' And these guys, who the cops think are sociopaths, almost every one of them is sitting there in the courtroom weeping in public."

They were not the only ones weeping. "Most of us, for reasons we don't necessarily understand, feel it's important to hold it together," Kennedy says. "But I was a mess."

The living, inevitably, can deliver more powerful testimony than the dead. On that same day in Cincinnati an ex-gang member named Arthur Phelps brought into the courtroom a woman, Margaret Long, who was paralysed from the chest down and confined to a wheelchair. Standing next to her, Phelps told the probationers how 17 years earlier he had shot Mrs Long and how he lived with the guilt every day. A reporter who was there wrote afterwards: "Then Long cried out, 'And I go to the bathroom in a bag,' and she snatched out the colostomy bag from inside the pocket of her wheelchair and held it up while the young men stared in horror."

After some pushing, Kennedy will admit the call-ins were his idea. The first one happened in 1996 after he'd spent months studying the unusual success of a police operation targeting a single street in an especially rough Boston suburb called Dorchester. Operation Scrap Iron had brought together many of the sticks and carrots that would later be used in the call-ins and had focused very tightly on guns. Stop using them, the cops had said, and we'll back off, just a little bit. They had also showed that they meant business by having one gang member who had ignored their warnings sent down to federal prison for 19 years for possession of a single bullet. His name was

Freddie Cardoza, and his name and address (Otisville Federal Correctional Institute Maximum Security Facility, New York) were displayed on a poster at the Boston call-in.

Everyone invited was given a phone number to call if they wanted help with school, job training or housing, and everyone spread the word afterwards that law enforcement seemed serious at last about enforcing the law. In the first full year after Operation Ceasefire, "youth homicide victimisation" in Dorchester was down by two thirds. The next four years showed a 50 per cent reduction in homicides for all age groups for the whole city. By 1999, Boston was safer than it had been before the crack epidemic that had devastated its poorer districts at the start of the decade.

The "Boston Miracle" worked elsewhere. Minneapolis "went quiet" (a frequent word-pairing in Kennedy's book). Stockton, California, went quiet. Roughly 70 American cities have adopted the Operation Ceasefire approach, including Los Angeles, Chicago and most challenging of all, the star of *The Wire* and once-thriving port city of Baltimore.

So far Baltimore has resisted even Kennedy's best efforts. Reading between the lines of his book, it seems to have given him something close to a nervous breakdown. But it is the exception that proves the rule. At the other end of the scale, in the West End district of High Point, North Carolina, there had not been a single homicide, shooting or reported rape between the first call-in there in 2004 and the time of his book going to press in late 2010. In Glasgow, knife crime is down by half since 2008 among the 400 gang members taking part in the scheme.

Success has made Kennedy's life a blur; an endless, debilitating road trip. At one point he stopped sleeping. Then he developed a life-threatening dependence on lorazepam – used to treat anxiety disorders – and had to wean himself off it at his parents' retirement home on the coast of Maine. Looking back, he admits that he, like most people even tangentially involved in America's urban gun nightmare, probably suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But therapy? "Too busy."

Instead of therapy, he has tried laughter. Researching individual gang members' records before a call-in, he says, "You're immersed for days sometimes in these awful, awful, awful, awful, awful killings." When he first came across colleagues laughing at the awfulness, he was appalled. Then he realised it was nothing more or less than a release, and laughed along with them.

"And one of the things we started laughing about was the guys who killed their friends by mistake or were killed by their friends by mistake, and there were a number of these. They were young men who were not trained in managing their weapons. They're excited, they're scared, they're drunk, they're stoned... and it's not surprising for example that you could be doing a drive-by in the back passenger seat and, without meaning to at all, you shoot the guy in the front passenger seat in the back of the head as your car's screaming down the road. And we started calling these 'Can't Get Good Help' killings. It's the guys you're doing this with. You miss the guy you're shooting at, you miss their house, you kill your friend, and we were laughing, and it's sick, but not as sick as the reality of it."

Kennedy's "home" is in Brooklyn, and so is his wife. His "job" is Professor of Criminal Justice at John Jay College in New York, but all three defer to the incessant demands of what is now a national network of Operation Ceasefires. He is not a normal professor. "This is what I do," he says.

And he hopes very much to do it in Britain. He is encouraged by Glasgow, where from what he can tell the call-ins are every bit as electrifying as in America. He has a fan in David Cameron, and repays him with anti-looting language that would have gone down well at the Tory party conference. ("When people are looting a shop, they are looting a shop. It's not a political statement. It's looting a shop.") He notes that the Home Office has paid for a study of whether the Boston model would work in Manchester, and the study concluded that it would. But the Metropolitan Police has not signed on yet, and he worries that people will get hurt unnecessarily before it does.

Kennedy says his most important discovery is also his simplest – that no one involved in gang violence, whether they fight with guns or knives, actually wants it to go on. "But when the Prime Minister said after the riots, 'We're going to draw on this American work,' there was a chorus of scepticism from the police. That was where we were in the United States 15 years ago." It may be time to stop believing our dangerous young men are so very different from their dangerous young men, and get with the programme.

Don't Shoot – One Man, a Street Fellowship and the End of Violence in Inner-City America by David Kennedy is published by Bloomsbury on November 7, and is available for £10.99 (RRP £12.99), free p&p, on 0845 2712134 or go to thetimes.co.uk/bookshop

BOOK EXTRACT

David Kennedy remembers a visit to the eye of the storm: crack-riddled Eighties LA

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 but a little distance, all looks lost; all is very much not. But the bad things that go on in these neighbourhoods cast long shadows, and the bad things are profoundly, indescribably, obscenely awful.

I saw it first, more than 25 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 America: young black men selling drugs to the idiot white folks who drive in from outside the neighbourhood 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. I had led a pretty standard privileged, well-educated, politically aware, socially conscious, white guy life.

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 any more.” The shaft, bullet hole drilled neatly through, was on display in the flight room.

South Central LA was surreal to someone like me, raised in the Midwest and on the East Coast. LA is low-rise; it goes out, not up. Single-family houses, nice lawns, Beach Boys sunshine, and whole neighbourhoods 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.

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 60 acres, a small town of low-rise stucco-and-concrete town house 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 for ever 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 18 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 favour. 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. It was, This is not OK. People should not have to live like this. This is wrong.

Somebody needs to do something.

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