

National Night Out and Community Policing

by {ga=jgreen}

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The last year has been a difficult one for the New York Police Department: the police shootings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond; the subsequent acquittal of the officers involved in the Diallo case; the lack of diplomacy by Commissioner Safir and Mayor Giuliani. All have increased the mistrust that many have felt toward the police for a long time.

But for the past 16 years, something out of the ordinary occurs on the first Tuesday night of August, and this year is no different. It is called National Night Out -- an evening of cooperation, communication, celebration, a series of activities throughout the country and throughout the city including basketball games between precinct teams and community groups, live music, staffed information booths, and magic shows. National Night Out is sponsored by the National Association of [Town Watch](#) , the same group that sponsors Neighborhood Watch groups.

The success of National Night Out is irrefutable: Since its founding in 1984, it has grown to involve over 30 million people in more than 9,000 communities. It is part of a growing trend toward community policing - a crime-fighting strategy based on the idea that a strong relationship between the police and the community is the key to lower crime rates. Most frequently, such a relationship is forged by having beat cops patrol the same areas, often on foot, so that area residents come to know their police officers. Other basic strategies of community policing involve outreach programs and community collaboration. Both the [National Center for Community Policing](#) and [Policing.com](#) offer what amounts to a primer on community policing - - its history, implementation and results.

The NYPD runs a host of programs to involve community residents and respond to their needs. Just last month, a Staten Island prosecutor announced the opening of a community office in Tottenville. The purpose of the field office, District Attorney William Murphy said, is to work more closely with the residents to identify community needs and issues, and "to solve problems before they begin."

Staten Island is not alone. Every precinct in the City has its own programs and community policing unit. Here are just a few examples:

- **Auxiliary Police Program.** The 111th precinct in Bayside is one of several precincts throughout the city where civilians are trained to be volunteers of the department. Wearing

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uniforms and patrolling in groups, they act as the eyes and ears of police, often at large community events where security is necessary.

- **Model Block Program.** Tenants organize block associations to monitor and maintain the quality of their block.
- **Precinct Open Houses.** This is meant to encourage informal interactions between police and the community.
- **Youth Programs.** A variety of youth programs are in place across the City, including the "Explorers Program." Open to high schoolers, these Explorers meet once a week at the precinct. Activities range from participating in community functions, such as parades and fairs, to field trips to law enforcement agencies, to rollerblading and athletic activities. During the school year 1998-99, the Explorers program and other youth programs reached over 117,000 youths.
- **Domestic Violence Program.** The 83rd precinct in Bushwick tracks all domestic violence cases reported. It collaborates with the Victims Service Agency to provide counseling and social services to battered women.

Critics say these programs are little more than a gesture, and that racism and abuse of power persist within the department. The US Commission on Civil Rights released a widely-publicized report in June which found that the NYPD was guilty of racial profiling in its stop-and-frisk practices. Among its recommendations: adopt community policing strategies -- specifically, encourage more officers to live in the areas they police.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's "Officer Next Door" program is trying to do just that, by offering police officers 50 percent savings on a home that they purchase in designated "revitalization areas" in inner city neighborhoods across the country. There are 53 such areas in New York City. It is unclear as of yet how many officers have taken advantage of the offer.

A recently released report on the New York Police Department's disciplinary actions against officers found that, despite the greater attention brought by the high-profile cases, there was actually a 25 percent drop in the allegations of police brutality last year. Public Advocate Mark Green also produced a report, though with far more damning statistics, entitled [Disciplining Police: Solving the Problem of Police Misconduct](#)

. Whether the situation of police brutality is getting worse or getting better, many suggest that one way to curtail it is through community policing.

Jessica Green is a student of public policy at Columbia University's Graduate School of International and Public Affairs.

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