

## **New York Times: At Brooklyn Police Station, Using Inmates' Video (and Pizza) to Prevent Youth Crime**

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Instead of the evening tour of officers gathering in the muster room of the 73rd Precinct station house in Brownsville, Brooklyn, on Tuesday, a group of 10 teenagers slumped on folding chairs, joking and fidgeting as lights were dimmed for a video.

The teenagers were transported by the video to the gothic looking cellblocks of the Sing Sing Correctional Facility, and into the presence of hardened inmates serving long sentences for murder.

The inmates did not threaten or berate, but rather wept and bared their souls, speaking directly to the cameras, and by extension, directly to these minority teenagers identified by the precinct's youth officers as at risk of being drawn into criminal activity.

"There's a group of guys in Sing Sing who are all convicted murderers," said Chief Joanne Jaffe, of the New York Police Department's Community Affairs Bureau, by way of introducing the video. "They were racked by guilt. They said, 'How can we do something to pay our debts to our innocent victims?'"

Photo



In talking with the group, Chief Joanne Jaffe learned that many had already been arrested and most had been around guns. Credit Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

One inmate in the video described inadvertently shooting and killing an innocent-bystander in a Queens movie theater as a teenager. Another spoke of feeling powerful when first picking up a gun as a teenager. A third spoke of impulsively shooting someone and finding out later “how it feels to have destroyed a family.”

The teenagers inside the precinct house seemed transfixed by the video, but were not exactly forthcoming when asked afterward to relate it to growing up in Brownsville, which has one of the highest rates in New York City of young men winding up incarcerated, or on either end of a gun.

They were finally coaxed into conversation with pizza and the persuasiveness of Chief Jaffe, who used a tough-but-tender approach.

Paul Maxwell, 18, of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, said he had been arrested multiple times on “petty offenses.” He related a recent altercation in which another teenager tried to embarrass him. If it had escalated, “it’s war,” said Mr. Maxwell, who added that he refrained.

“You should’ve hit him,” said Isaiah, 15, a high school sophomore.

That might lead to an arrest, Chief Jaffe said.

“No one’s going to snitch,” Marquis, 15, said.

Isaiah said, “We don’t care if we go to jail, because we lived and they didn’t.” Some teenagers did not want their full names published for fear of reprisals in the neighborhood for speaking to the police and to the press.

Chief Jaffe asked the teenagers how many had been arrested and had been around guns. Most said they had. They said guns provided protection in rough areas, such as the Howard Houses.

“I could get shot going home right now,” one teenager said.

A 16-year-old high school sophomore from Brownsville said, “It’s either we protect ourselves, or nobody going to protect us.”

Marquis described his attitude toward an attacker as: “I always put my family first because I don’t care about their family.”

Chief Jaffe pointed out that the inmates in the video became roiled with guilt for destroying another family.

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The video, a minidocumentary called “Voices From Within,” was made by inmates at Sing Sing in Ossining, N.Y., and made available, through the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice in New York City, to the city’s Department of Probation and Police Department.

Both departments have begun training personnel to use the film to stimulate discussions in youth groups. The goal is to avoid crime and, Chief Jaffe said, “to stop and think about consequences and how you can ruin your life in 10 seconds.”

The video began as a partnership between Anthony J. Annucci, acting commissioner for the State Department of Correctional Services, and Michael Capra, the superintendent of Sing Sing, to make a “groundbreaking project to end gun violence,” said Superintendent Capra, who invited Dan Slepian, a producer at the NBC News program “Dateline,” and Rob Allen, his film editor associate, to help make the piece as a volunteer project.

During filming, each inmate sat alone in a room speaking directly to the camera, giving emotional and confessional pleas to the viewers not to follow their path to gun violence.

The video, which Mr. Slepian presented in December at a Tedx event, features inmates ruefully recalling their murders as explosive, unplanned outbursts prompted by momentary flashes of anger and chaos.

Chief Jaffe had Deputy Inspector Miguel Iglesias, the 73rd Precinct's commanding officer, and Sgt. Duane Palmer, of the department's school safety division, gather the teenagers.

She also showed them "Guns Change Lives," a video made last year and based on her interviews with several New York City men whose criminal involvement led to their being shot and confined to wheelchairs.

At one point, Chief Jaffe told one silent teenager, "I love that you're not making eye contact with me," which coaxed him into the conversation.

When Isaiah became argumentative, Chief Jaffe asked him about his home life. He said he was being raised by his aunt, his mother having died from renal failure when he was 9.

Chief Jaffe walked over and put her arm around him. Later, Isaiah said he got the point of both videos.

"You need to think before you react," he said.