What Happened When a Brooklyn Neighborhood Policed Itself for Five Days

On a two-block stretch of Brownsville in April, the police stepped aside and let residents respond to 911 calls. It was a bold experiment that some believe could redefine law-enforcement in New York City.

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Brownsville residents stand sentry on their own blocks, an effort meant to help the community police itself.

It had been a quiet April afternoon until about a dozen teenagers began running up Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville, yelling and cursing. They were chasing a girl of about 14 and it was clear they wanted a fight.

Five plainclothes police officers watched warily. Across Pitkin stood about half a dozen men, civilians in jeans and purple-and-gray sweatshirts.
“They got it,” an officer said.

The teenagers slowed as they spotted the men, workers from an organization called Brownsville In Violence Out, who calmly waved them in different directions. They scattered as the girl fled down a side street.

The brief encounter encapsulated a simple yet unorthodox concept that is at the heart of a bold experiment organizers believe could redefine law-enforcement in New York: letting neighbors, not the police, respond to low-level street crime.

Several times a year, workers from Brownsville In Violence Out stand sentry on two blocks for five days. The police channel all 911 calls from that area to the civilians. Unless there is a major incident or a victim demands an arrest, officers, always in plainclothes, shadow the workers.

The civilians have no arrest powers. But they have persuaded people to turn in illegal guns, prevented shoplifting, kept a man from robbing a bodega and stopped a pregnant woman from hitting a boyfriend who had not bought a car seat and a stroller as he had promised.

They are part of the Brownsville Safety Alliance, a group of neighborhood and city groups, police officers and members of the Kings County District Attorney’s office that is trying to ensure that fewer people are arrested and entangled in the criminal justice system.

Members of the Brownsville Safety Alliance keep their eyes and ears open for problems that could become conflicts that would otherwise draw the police.

As the men and women from Brownsville In Violence Out watch for mayhem, agencies offering services like free child care and addiction recovery sit at folding tables, distributing pamphlets and luring passers-by with games, stress balls and pens.
Over the next three years, the city will provide $2.1 million to help link the local organizations that participate most frequently in the Safety Alliance so that they can work cohesively throughout the year.

The effort mirrors others that have sprung up after demonstrations swept New York and much of the country to protest the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. They are meant to modulate the use of officially sanctioned force, using a neighborhood’s innate desire for order as a tool.

Residents have embraced the concept, said Nyron Campbell, 37, an assistant program manager at Brownsville In Violence Out.

“They say, ‘We feel more safe. We can walk without feeling anxiety,’” he said. “While they know that we do need police, it’s possible that we can police ourselves.”

The idea came from Terrell Anderson, who in 2020 took over as commander of the area’s 73rd Precinct. Raised in Brownsville, he promised to rebuild the precinct’s relationship with a wary community.

Residents had complained that officers had become aggressive, grabbing men off the street to arrest them for minor offenses. The neighborhood was reeling from the 2019 shooting of Kwesi Ashun, a T-shirt vendor with paranoid schizophrenia, killed as he swung at an officer with a chair at a nail salon.

Inspector Anderson asked residents what the department could do to engender trust.
Inspector Terrell Anderson set about rebuilding relationships in the neighborhood where he was reared. New York City Police Department

Among them was Dushoun Almond, a jocular and self-deprecating man who goes by the nickname Bigga.

Mr. Almond, who runs Brownsville In Violence Out, said Inspector Anderson realized that sometimes all that is needed to keep the peace is a person with credibility — not necessarily a badge — telling someone: “Get out of here. You’re bugging.”

“Members of the community see themselves in Bigga,” said Jeffrey Coots, the director of the From Punishment to Public Health initiative at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The group works closely with the Brownsville Safety Alliance, conducting surveys about the initiative and tracking its progress.

“This is someone who is like me, who understands me and is calling me out on the fact that I’m out of pocket a little bit,” Mr. Coots said.
Deputy Inspector Mark A. Vazquez, who was also raised in Brownsville, took over last year after Inspector Anderson was transferred, and said that he continued the project because public safety is “shared responsibility.”

Inspector Vazquez said he was 4 when his father was shot and that many family members have been incarcerated.

“I know how it is,” Inspector Vazquez said.

Workers from Brownsville In Violence Out give away promotional items and literature about social-service programs.

Not everyone is convinced. Lise Perez, owner of Clara’s Beauty Salon on Pitkin Avenue, has 26 cameras around her store and works behind a counter protected by a thick plastic partition. No one can get in or out without her pressing a button.

“In this area, nobody feels too safe,” she said. “We’re all here surviving.”

The idea of five days in which the police refer 911 calls unsettles her.

“It’s like they left us without protection,” she said. “It doesn’t give me peace.”

But Minerva Vitale, 66, who lives on the avenue, said the effort was “incredibly important.”

“We call them and, poof, they come right away,” she said. “You think they ain’t ready for this? Yes, they are.”
Minerva Vitale, left, said she trusts the Brownsville Safety Alliance to respond to crime on the streets.

Tiffany Burgess, 42, one of the Brownsville In Violence Out outreach workers, said she was mystified by the skeptics.

“If we can calm them down and get them to walk away, what’s the problem?” she said. “You should want that.”

More people around the country do. The Brownsville initiative is part of a movement called the “community responder model,” which aims to reduce the use of armed officers to handle many calls.
Similar programs are underway in Eugene, Ore.; Denver; and Rochester, N.Y., among other places, according to the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank. The group has estimated that almost 40 percent of calls to police could be handled by community responders.

Police officers are present, but they only shadow civilians who are the primary responders.

In Brownsville, the effort gives residents not only more say over what public safety looks like, but can deter crime if people know there are more eyes watching, said Eric Gonzalez, the Brooklyn district attorney.

“A lot of people worry that if police systems are not fully active, crime will go up,” he said.

But the Safety Alliance has been thriving amid a positive trend in the 73rd Precinct, Mr. Gonzalez said. In the first half of 2023, homicides fell 50 percent, shootings fell 25 percent and the rate of grand larcenies of automobiles also fell even as it rose in other neighborhoods, he said.

One set of watching eyes belongs to Mr. Almond, 47, a former gang member who spent more than 13 years in prison for a bank robbery. He returned to Brownsville in 2014 and got a tattoo of a smoking gun behind his right ear to hide a small scar left from a bullet wound.
Dushoun Almond, known as Bigga, has the hard-won experience to help him talk people out of decisions they may regret.

His past, along with his calm, straightforward approach, helps him navigate conflicts. During one Safety Alliance week, he persuaded a man going into a bodega with a gun to give him his weapon and go home. The next day, that same man returned, but this time to volunteer.

He spent the day “squashing beefs,” Mr. Almond said. “He broke up like three fights.”

Just as he told the story, a 911 call came in about a fight at a deli on the corner of Watkins and Pitkin. Mr. Almond slowly walked over to size up the dispute between two men — one of whom had taken out a restraining order against the other, a person named Lala.

Lala had disappeared, but the other man remained outside the deli.

“From now on, so there won’t ever be problem like this in our community, call me,” Mr. Almond told the man, who nodded. “Go in the store. Don’t antagonize each other.”
Mr. Almond then told one of the outreach workers to find Lala and order him to stay away.

Mr. Almond walked toward Sgt. Jared Delaney and Officer Nickita Beckford.

“It’s all good,” he said. “I took care of it.”

The workers take on a heavy load, handling cases that fall into the yawning gap between law enforcement and social services.

Social service groups supply clothing, shoes and hot drinks, an effort to draw in neighborhood residents and tell them about resources in and around Brownsville.

On the second-to-last day of the Safety Alliance week, a chilly, overcast Friday, a car pulled up. The driver pushed a woman onto the street, then drove off. Crying, screaming and intoxicated, she had no money or identification and did not seem to know where she was.

Mr. Almond’s team surrounded her. Ms. Burgess, the outreach worker, learned her name was Alicia and it was her 23rd birthday. She told Ms. Burgess she had paranoid schizophrenia and kept insisting on going to Rite-Aid. Ms. Burgess was worried she was planning to steal something.

Dana Rachlin, executive director of We Build the Block, a Brooklyn-based public safety organization that helps run the alliance, bought Alicia Chinese food to calm her. As she ate her meal, Ms. Rachlin called the city’s mental health hotline.

She waited while on hold for 10 minutes before someone told her it would be 24 hours before a team could come, and that she could call the police.

Ms. Rachlin rolled her eyes and hung up.
It was getting colder. Ms. Rachlin sat on the bench at the bus stop and Alicia sat next to her, put her head on her shoulder and fell asleep.

Finally, Ms. Rachlin and Mr. Almond and an executive from a social services group drove Alicia to an intake center for a shelter. She could not get a bed until Monday but she could stay at the center through the weekend.

When Ms. Rachlin called the center the next morning to check on her, Alicia was gone.

“We’ve been looking for her,” Ms. Rachlin said. “We have our eyes open.”

She said the eventual goal was to close that gap and create a system where someone like Alicia, who might have been arrested for fighting or shoplifting, could get shelter, cash and an identification card immediately.

At least on that Friday, Ms. Rachlin said, the alliance “provided a moment of safety.”

Dana Rachlin, left, and Tiffany Burgess, right, try to help Alicia, a 23-year-old woman who was thrown out of a car on Pitkin Avenue.