

What Police Have Known for Years



// **WRITE TO US!** If you have further questions, contact Chuck Canterbury at fopchuck@outlook.com.

In my career in law enforcement, I have heard officers described in many ways. The descriptions include social worker, counselor, caseworker, teacher, babysitter and peacekeeper. Everyone thinks we are equipped to deal with all of society's issues.

One factor that all high-crime areas have in common is poverty. The events that have unfolded in the past few months have prompted calls for a kinder and gentler policing model, but that is easier said than done. Areas stuck in abject poverty need and want crime control, and when departments are short-staffed, they are merely call-responsive and do not have the time nor the capabilities to address the main issue — which is poverty.

Rank-and-file law enforcement officers know that we have always been counted on as the first responders for much more than criminal activity. We are the first to notice when a neighborhood is headed toward a downward spiral, and we are the first to see the effects of poverty on our society. Programs such as community-oriented policing and problem-oriented policing both include an element of enforcement. When enforcement increases but nothing is done to address the underlying issues, the police get blamed for the failure to make the community better.

What I have seen is that even though violent crime is down in general, it is not down in areas of high poverty. The rates for crime, drug use, infant mortality, high school dropout rates, unemployment, one-parent households and shorter life spans are all evident in areas that suffer from poverty. The racial and ethnic makeup may change, but the common denominator is the poverty that inflicts these ills on any given community.

In small towns across America, a large percentage of city income is derived from traffic tickets. Quotas have been taboo in law enforcement for years, but many are

still saddled with descriptions such as "performance standards." We cannot be pushed to "performance standards" and interact with the community in a manner consistent with solving problems. The trend to push more responsibility onto law enforcement is a natural result of poor fiscal management by elected city officials. This is a trend that must stop. Officers cannot be held responsible for being the revenue source in our poor communities. When this occurs, the natural reaction is to blame the only part of government that the citizens see: the police.

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Government officials must address the problems and side effects of poverty. Law enforcement professionals cannot be all things to all people, and we are not and cannot be the only instrument of government that our citizens in poor neighborhoods see. It is time for our elected officials to realize that we are highly trained professionals who can and will protect our citizens to the best of our ability, but we are not the sole solution to the main issue.

We stand ready to work to help our communities improve the quality of life for all, but public officials must step up to the plate and develop public-private partnerships that include every stakeholder in the poverty-stricken areas of our jurisdictions in order to see things improve. **FOP**