



Brooklyn's "God Squad" of pastors and mothers of shooting victims gathers around the corner from the site of a recent murder as Pastor Gil Monroe speaks through a megaphone.

BLOOD IN THE STREETS, TENSION IN THE AIR

Shootings are up across the United States, while some communities try to rebuild trust with police

by Emily Belz in Brooklyn, N.Y.

photos by AG

PASTOR GIL MONROSE HEARD a ruckus as he knocked on a door around the corner from where a 41-year-old man had been murdered in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, the day before. A fight had broken out at the murder site, someone had broken a car window, and tensions were escalating. ¶ Monrose headed to the fight, noting that the building had a reputation for killings: “It’s always on the front page.” This particular precinct has seen 11 murders this year, compared with four at the same time last year. This neighborhood also experienced a high number of COVID-19 deaths: 243 in this ZIP code.

The neighborhood otherwise feels pleasant and safe. People chatted on the stoops of well-kept single-family homes. A man working out of a truck labeled “Justin’s Mobile Detailing” washed cars a block away in the evening sunshine.

New York’s shootings are up significantly this year but still historically low after two decades of steep declines in crime. Shootings are up across the country, in Democrat-run cities like New York and in Republican-run cities like Jacksonville, Fla., which is on pace to break its homicide record. A *Wall Street Journal* analysis of crime statistics among the nation’s 50 largest cities found that reported homicides were up 24 percent so far this year.

“Shootings have gone up a lot more than murders, which is good in the sense that people aren’t getting murdered,” said criminologist Peter Moskos of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Moskos is a former Baltimore City police officer. “But bad in the sense that it indicates a style of cowboy shooting into crowds ... which is worse for quality of life.”

Voters described violent crime as the most important issue to them after the coronavirus outbreak in an Aug. 13 Pew Research survey. President Donald Trump has made the crime increase a focal point of his campaign, describing it as a feature of Democrat-run cities. But the homicide spike is happening in cities of all parties, sizes, and types—in Tulsa, Okla., and Omaha, Neb. The biggest increases are in Austin, Fort Worth,

and San Antonio in Texas; Phoenix, Ariz.; and Chicago, Ill., according to the *Journal’s* analysis.

Crime experts don’t know the reasons and may not have answers for a while. Other violent crime has not increased, and property crime is down, according to crime analyst Jeff Asher. People in high-crime neighborhoods talked about joblessness and young people not having in-person support networks like school and church. The question is whether this is a pandemic-driven spike or a reversal of two decades of crime drops.

“This whole quarantine has put a lot of stress on households,” said Alice McKay, a Brooklyn mom whose son was murdered in 2014.

Community activists and the New York Police Department agree on one contributing factor: a breakdown in trust between communities and law enforcement. Viral videos of police violence worsen that relationship. The result: People in a community take justice into their own hands instead of calling the police, and police get less help from the community in solving crimes. Police officers told me they feel hostility from communities where they work, and people are filming their every move when they show up. That’s when people like Monrose—part of a group

known as the “God Squad”—try to bring peace, though no one has the perfect solution for stemming violence in the first place.

“OUR COMMUNITY HISTORICALLY has had a tense relationship with police. [Crime increases] can highlight the fact of the relationship,” said Monrose, about East Flatbush. “Some people would love to have more police. Some see the police car and say, ‘What are you doing here?’”

Meanwhile, NYPD members think the bad behavior of other departments, such as Minneapolis, unfairly smeared their agency, which they say has

reformed significantly over the last few years.

“I like those reforms ... it was moving in the right direction,” said one NYPD sergeant who was not allowed to speak on the record. “I consider myself a constitutionalist, so I don’t want to see some overbearing police department.”

This sergeant would be happy, for example, to see social workers instead of cops respond to calls involving the mentally ill. The NYPD banned chokeholds long ago. A new city law criminalized police putting pressure on someone’s diaphragm, which angered New York cops who argued they could

face charges for any arrest of a resisting suspect. In response the City Council amended the law to prohibit police “recklessly” putting pressure on a suspect’s diaphragm.

Moskos agreed that the NYPD has reformed: The last few years show arrests and use-of-force complaints are down. He thinks the NYPD’s record on police-involved shootings is remarkably low for a city its size, and police departments in midsize and Western cities like Albuquerque, N.M., have more egregious records for shooting deaths of black people.

But some civil rights advocates say police-involved shootings aren’t enough



The God Squad prays with the mother of Spooky, a man killed in an Aug. 26 shooting, as they gather to remember him.



Community members pour champagne on the sidewalk to honor and remember Spooky.

of a metric for assessing a police department. Nonshooting deaths such as those of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Daniel Prude in Rochester, N.Y., have increasingly brought police reports on use-of-force incidents into question.

In this atmosphere of distrust, the NYPD sergeant said police have pulled back from proactive policing. Officers might decide stopping a vehicle for a minor offense isn't worth the risk.

Some criminologists have compared this to a slow-motion police strike. As *WORLD* noted earlier this year, Boston police went on strike after the 1918-19 Spanish flu pandemic, and mobs smashed and looted stores.

New York Police Commissioner Dermot Shea, who served as an NYPD officer back when the city hit its murder peak in 1991, described the current crime increase as “a perfect storm within a

THE HOMICIDE SPIKE IS HAPPENING IN CITIES OF ALL PARTIES, SIZES, AND TYPES—IN TULSA AND OMAHA.

perfect storm.” But he thinks it’s “a spike” and “we’re going to get out of this.”

BACK IN EAST FLATBUSH, BROOKLYN, local news reports described the Aug. 26 murder of a 41-year-old man, whom locals called Spooky, as “gang-related.” Three people were shot on that corner around 1 a.m. that day. Two survived. Residents blamed the police in part for Spooky’s death: They said someone tried to take him to the hospital in a car, but police stopped it on the way.

Police told local reporters paramedics had rushed the three shooting victims to the hospital, but did not return a request for clarification on whether they stopped the car ferrying a wounded Spooky. Regardless, people on the street were mad. NYPD detectives begged the community to provide information.

In that tense atmosphere, Pastor Monroe tried to prevent any retaliatory violence as the fight broke out at the site of the murder. He leads the God Squad, a group of neighborhood ministers who for a decade have visited corners after a shooting to talk to family members and prevent retaliation.

Wearing their bright orange God Squad T-shirts, they go to corners at all hours, holding one corner until 2 a.m. over a rowdy Labor Day weekend night. In September, Commissioner Shea went out with the God Squad, tweeting: “Together, community and cops, we can #stoptheviolence.”

But as the fight escalated the day after this particular murder, police weren’t around. The God Squad was, along with several Brooklyn mothers who had lost children to gun violence. Teenagers from Flatbush Leadership

Academy joined the squad too. The God Squad and others formed the young men’s mentoring program after the 2013 fatal police shooting of 16-year-old Kimani Gray in the same neighborhood.

Nadine Sylvester now heads the academy. In 2017, someone murdered her 15-year-old son as he was walking down their block on his way to play basketball.

As she heard the fight escalating the day after Spooky’s murder, her antennae went up.

“You will step back,” she told the teenagers she was overseeing. “Let Pastor Monroe handle it.”

He and some of the mothers went to intervene but backed off after they saw other friends of the family trying to do the same. Someone called 911, and the police eventually came. They sat in a patrol car on the corner, keeping a distance. Monroe said they didn’t engage because the people in this case blame them.

The street quieted again. Someone had washed Spooky’s blood from the night before off the sidewalk. Neighbors lit candles and poured out bottles of Hennessy and champagne on the sidewalk. They offered condolences to the man’s mother who sat, stricken and silent, on a beat-up office chair on the sidewalk next to the candles. Monroe noted afterward that poverty contributed to the rising tension: The family had nowhere to go—no front yard, no spot to grieve in private—but on the street.

Monroe asked the family if the God Squad could say a prayer over the corner, and someone turned off the thumping music of a car. Everyone turned to Monroe. He prayed for the mother: “God, we ask your blessing in the deepest moment of her crying. ... We pray that there will be healing, that there will be justice for this family.” The God Squad moms put their arms around Spooky’s mom, bear-hugging her for several minutes.

After the prayer, one man muttered about making someone pay for the murder. This is the cycle the God Squad

mothers had seen over and over, and they were weary. The God Squad tried to calm the talk of vengeance. They told the man a revenge shooting might hit others accidentally—what if he hit a child?

As Natasha Christopher, one of the mothers, walked away from the corner, she said, “I’m sick of this. I’m tired.” Pamela Hight, who had previously lost two sons to murder, stopped in the middle of the street and bent over in her own grief and pain: “That’s a feeling you don’t want to feel.”

SO WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS for cities across the country facing an increase in shootings?

Pastors, police, criminologists, and moms of victims I talked to agreed improving relationships between communities and police is key, through community policing, better witness protection for witnesses, and more respectful interactions.

Talib Hudson has worked in crime prevention in both community organizations and in the Manhattan district attorney’s office. He spoke recently at the local chapter of the AND Campaign, a Christian organization that has held events on both police violence and community gun violence. Hudson remembered working with police officers who carry themselves as if they are part of the community.

“Even when they’re arresting someone, they’re explaining, ‘This is why I’m arresting you,’” said Hudson. “They talk to them, they spend time with them. They see people as people.”

Law enforcement argues officers need to have political support to do more proactive policing, which requires making more stops.

Criminologist Moskos agreed: “At some point, you’re going to have to stop people.”

New York has been working to decrease the number of stops since the changes to the NYPD’s Bloomberg-era stop-and-frisk policy, which a judge ruled unconstitutional in 2013.

Murders dropped under stop-and-frisk, but they also continued to drop as the NYPD severely curtailed the policy after the ruling, so the policy’s benefit isn’t clear.



LEFT: The God Squad gathers to pray and remember George Floyd. RIGHT: Pastor Louis Straker speaks for justice, healing, and reform.

Some conservatives and liberals have recommended de-unionizing the police, which would make enacting reform and removing bad cops easier. That was one feature of a turnaround in Camden, N.J.

Experts I talked to also agreed that community engagement at the site of recent shootings, as the God Squad does, is a good idea. Hudson noted that street engagement is a historical solution to crime and reduced crime among European gangs on the Lower East Side more than a century ago.

Christian experts in crime fighting have also focused on investing in high-crime communities through mentoring and jobs. Dan Scanlan, a longtime crime reporter with the *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville, said community-level solutions to crime too often depend on one charismatic leader.

“Not many pastor-proposed programs have survived,” he told me. An exception is Save Our Sons, which he said was one of the few with a good track record on preventing crime in Jacksonville. The program helps at-risk teenage boys get good educations and jobs and

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works with young teenage offenders to keep them from re-offending.

Other experts recommended churches increase their involvement with prison ministry, which may help prevent inmates from re-offending upon release. Some community leaders say poverty is a basic factor, and jobs—even employing teenagers in programs like the God Squad—help fight crime.

AFTER PRAYING OVER THE CORNER in East Flatbush, Pastor Monroe took out a megaphone and proclaimed to the street, “Every time someone is shot with a gun, we are going to come out and talk about it.” People stopped their cars and asked what was going on. The squad handed out bags with surgical masks and God Squad flyers. A UPS driver pulled up to the stop sign at the corner. Pamela Hight, one of the mothers with the God Squad, asked if she wanted any masks. The driver took a few.

“Who are you guys?” the driver asked.

“We’re the God Squad,” Hight said and explained the group’s mission.

The UPS driver shook her head: “You should’ve been here yesterday.” She saw the crime scene taped off as she was making deliveries then.

“You stay safe,” said Hight as the driver continued on her way. In the month after the murder in the God Squad’s precinct, no one else was killed. ■

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