

News

DIVIDED AMERICA: Bridging the Gap Between Police, Policed

By ADAM GELLER
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NEW YORK (AP) — On an unusually cool night for summer, Mike Perry and his crew thread the sidewalks running through Staten Island's Stapleton Houses, tracked by police cameras bolted to the apartment blocks and positioned atop poles.

"The better the weather, the more people will be out," Perry says. "Activity — not all good, neither."

Perry's group, five black men and one Latino, all acknowledge past crimes or prison time. Perry, himself, used to deal drugs around another low-income housing complex, two miles away. Now, though, their Cure Violence team works to defuse arguments that can lead to shootings and match people with job training and counseling. Their goals are not so different from those of the police.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This story is part of *Divided America*, AP's ongoing exploration of the economic, social and political divisions in American society.

While Perry gives cops their due, he keeps his distance. Two years ago, within walking distance of this spot, a black man named Eric Garner died in a confrontation with police officers. Garner was suspected of sell-



Police officers talk with community activist Cynthia Davis in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, May 24, 2016. The recent highly publicized deaths of black men in encounters with police in Minnesota, Louisiana and across the country, and now the sniper killing of five Dallas officers, have focused new attention on the chasm between police and minorities, one of so many divides in this contentious election year. Years of tension have left people wary in both the policing community and in minority neighborhoods, with many yearning for one another's respect.

ing loose cigarettes; an officer wrestled him to the ground by his neck. His last words — "I can't breathe" — were captured on cellphone video that rocketed across the internet.

"I know those officers did not mean to kill Eric," says Perry, a 37-year-old father of two who knew Garner.

But, "you need to look an officer in the eye who doesn't understand and go, 'Brother, I want to get home, too.' They're defending these communities that they don't know."

As Americans struggle with the highly publicized deaths of black men in encounters with

police in Minnesota, Louisiana and across the country, and now the sniper killing of five Dallas officers, Perry and his fellow Staten Islanders have the dubi-

town though it's part of the nation's biggest city, police and the policed have had to coexist.

The events of recent weeks have focused new attention on the chasm

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ous distinction of being a step ahead. Since Garner's death in July 2014, they have confronted a measure of the anger, pain and alienation that the nation now shares. On this 58-square-mile island that residents say often feels like a small

between police and minorities, one of so many divides in this contentious election year. Years of tension have left people wary in both the policing community and in minority neighborhoods, with many yearning for one another's re-

spect.

It's not simple, though, to change the way people see each other.

"What we have to bear in mind is that when a particular culture has been created, or when people sense a certain culture is operating, it takes time in order to change that culture," says the Rev. Victor Brown, a pastor of one of the larger African-American churches on Staten Island's North Shore. Brown, a spiritual adviser to Garner's family who criticized the grand jury's decision not to indict the officer involved, serves as a part-time police chaplain.

The challenge was captured in a nationwide poll last summer by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs, in which 81 percent of black Americans said police are too quick to use deadly force, compared with 33 percent of whites. A third of blacks said they trust police to

work in the best interest of the community, less than half the percentage of whites.

The voices of Staten Islanders speak to attitudes and experience that are often more complicated than might be reflected in polling num-

bers.

Like the white retired officer who credits a longtime black partner for much of his success in patrolling poor neighborhoods, and worries today's cops are not street-wise enough.

Or the black street vendor who rails against police for Garner's death, but says officers are needed to clean up the street where that death occurred.

"I think the divide is worse than it should be and more than people think it is," says Joe Brandefine, a retired NYPD detective who helped organize a 2014 pro-police rally. "I believe there's truth in both sides, that each side needs to see each other in a little different light."

On Staten Island, police-community relationships have long been personal.

About 3,000 police officers, scores of retired cops and their families live here, many in the heavily white neighborhoods on the southern two-thirds of the island. In those neighborhoods, protests that followed Garner's death in July 2014 were met with "God Bless the NYPD" yard signs and pro-police rallies. The tensions intensified after a grand jury decided in late 2014 not to indict the officer for Garner's death.

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