Six Blocks, 96 Buildings, Zero Shootings: New Recipe at the Queensbridge Houses

By Jim Dwyer
Jan. 19, 2017

Standing on a walkway at the Queensbridge Houses in Queens, two young men clutched guns and snarled dares at each other. This might have been a scene out of the 1980s or '90s, when Nas, one of the hip-hop giants who grew up in Queensbridge, rapped, “Any day could be your last.”

But it was an afternoon two months ago, decades on.

And stepping between the two men was Shyism Bryant, 41, a retired drug dealer who spent 13 years away from Queensbridge, in state prison. He now works as a violence interrupter at Queensbridge. Two colleagues, Kristofer Bain and Taylonn Murphy, were with him.

Tactically, Mr. Bryant said, he believed it was critical to buy time, and then to create a psychic space so that each of the young men could subtract guns from the dispute without losing face.

“I said, ‘You gotta put away the guns,’” Mr. Bryant said.

Drawing on his past as a man who had been shot and spent time in prison, Mr. Bryant said, he told the two men that if they fired at each other, they would go to jail. That had not been on their minds, he said, and it was a reason to put down the guns that did not involve a surrender. “You have to give someone an opportunity not to look like a punk in a group of people,” Mr. Bryant said.

On Thursday, Queensbridge — the largest housing project in the United States, and a social caldron a generation ago — marked its 365th day without a shooting. No one can say with certainty what, precisely, has worked. There are soft approaches, like better cultural and arts opportunities at the local elementary school, and a robust menu of after-school offerings at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement. There is the security apparatus: 15 light towers, 360 cameras and police officers assigned to Queensbridge. There was also the introduction one year ago this week of Cure Violence, which employs Mr. Bryant and others to cool confrontations that are apt to become lethal.
“If you put it all together, that’s how you get to a year without gun violence in the largest housing project in the country,” said Jimmy Van Bramer, the leader of the Democratic majority on the City Council whose district includes Queensbridge.

The Cure Violence program at Queensbridge is called 696, for the six blocks of the development and its 96 buildings. The one-year milestone matters to Mr. Bain, who led a similar effort in South Jamaica, Queens, that also passed 365 days without a shooting, but not as much as the building of what he called a “public health” approach to shootings. That concept had been kicked around for years until Dr. Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist, advocated fighting violence as an epidemic, a contagious disease that spreads unless it is interrupted. In 2013, a program in East New York, Brooklyn, also helped snuff out shootings for a year.

The effort requires people like Mr. Bryant who have credibility with young people, said Mr. Bain, a former legislative aide in the city who grew up in violent neighborhoods. “You can’t fake your commitment or your empathy,” he said. “People closest to the problem often know the solution.”

In 1992, Janet Cole, the president of the Queensbridge tenants association, said, “They shoot here two or three times a week.”

That number had fallen, but shootings had not disappeared during the long era of decline in city crime: From 2004 through 2015, there were an average of four shootings per year. Neighborhood police officers “have cellphones and everyone has their number,” said Inspector Elvio Capocci, the executive officer of the police department’s housing bureau. “And people call them. We are using precision policing — targeting the small amount of people who are causing chaos and trouble.”

That once included mass frisking. In 2003, the police reported that 2,325 people were stopped and searched. Last year, Inspector Capocci said, 11 people were, down from 15 in 2015. The last murder in Queensbridge was in May 2015.

“We’re not just stopping a million people to get something,” Inspector Capocci said. “The results speak for themselves.”

On the afternoon that the two young men put away their guns, the parties continued to hurl threats that the matter was not over. “I took a set of individuals one way, and Kristofer and Shyism took them the other way,” Mr. Murphy said.

Within a few days, the two men had come in for a mediation.

“All we’re trying to do is make sure each party lives another day,” Mr. Murphy said.

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A version of this article appears in print on January 20, 2017, on Page A26 of the New York edition with the headline: Six Blocks, 96 Buildings, Zero Shootings: New Recipe at the Queensbridge Houses.

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