Police Face Backlash Over Virus Rules. Enter ‘Violence Interrupters.’

Groups trained to prevent gun and gang violence are being tapped to persuade New York City residents to follow social distancing rules.

By Ashley Southall
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When Iesha Sekou began passing out surgical masks and disposable gloves in Harlem early in the pandemic, some people laughed and said she was taking things too far. It was an unfamiliar role for Ms. Sekou, the founder of a nonprofit that usually works to prevent gang violence.

But as deaths from the virus mounted in predominantly black neighborhoods like the one where Ms. Sekou's group operates, people started chasing her and her workers down the street to get supplies, she said.

Even young skeptics who "had their little theories" about the virus dropped their resistance after Ms. Sekou and her volunteers warned them that the police could stop them for not having a mask, or worse, they might get infected and unwittingly pass the disease along to their grandmothers.

“That's a soft spot that we were able to hit and get them to know that if you don't want to do this for you, you don't like the way it looks, do it for who you live with, whose couch you sleep on,” Ms. Sekou said.

People like Ms. Sekou are known as “credible messengers” or “violence interrupters” in their line of work, and city officials say they may be critical to overcoming resistance to social distancing rules in some black and Hispanic neighborhoods where there is distrust of the authorities.

Violence prevention groups, like Ms. Sekou’s Street Corner Resources, are part of a broader effort by City Hall to use civilians to encourage people to follow social-distancing rules rather than relying solely on police officers.

Mayor Bill de Blasio made that effort a priority after viral videos of heavy-handed arrests in black and Hispanic neighborhoods prompted public outrage and enforcement data showed stark racial disparities in arrests, leading to calls for change from elected leaders.

The credible messengers are mostly young, black and Hispanic men, from...
the same demographic groups that have been given summonses and arrested the most for offenses related to the pandemic. Many of them have past involvement in gangs or crime, experiences they use to defuse street conflicts before they escalate to violence and to steer peers toward services like job training.

Working for about 50 violence prevention groups coordinated by the mayor’s office, some of the messengers were already handing out face masks and other supplies and responding to 311 complaints about social distancing when local police commanders asked them to.

But Eric Cumberbatch, the deputy director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, said the city would like them to play a bigger role in helping to persuade young people who do not trust the police to take actions to curb the epidemic.

“They’re looked at as leaders,” he said. “And they have inroads and touch with a very vulnerable population, which are usually young people that government and city agencies struggle to have contact with in a productive fashion.”

In addition to enlisting the antiviolence workers, the city plans to appoint 2,300 clergy and city workers, and others as “social-distancing ambassadors.” The Police Department also plans to deploy auxiliary officers to parks.

Chief Terence A. Monahan, the department’s top uniformed official, said the police welcomed the opportunity to step back from enforcing the rules to focus on fighting crime. Shootings have risen slightly under the citywide stay-at-home orders and burglaries targeting shuttered businesses have surged, he said.

“We don’t want to be the social-distancing police going out there,” he said. “But there’s been many a time other people have gone out there and we got the phone call, ‘They’re not listening to us, send the police over.’ This is something I don’t think we can get out of, but any help, any assistance we can get from anybody would be greatly appreciated.”

On May 7, as a public outcry grew over videos of pandemic-related arrests, the police and city officials met with the leaders of credible messenger programs across the city to discuss expanding their role.

The participants in the meeting, held on Zoom, pushed the police to reconsider their approach to social distancing in black and Hispanic neighborhoods, pointing to recent encounters that have drawn comparisons to unconstitutional “stop and frisk” practices.

For their part, the police have denied that officers enforcing the rules have had a racial bias. Chief Monahan told the people on the call that in almost all the cases, officers had taken action on
public complaints that they would have had to address even if there were no pandemic. Those complaints included people smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol and playing dice outside.

“Listen, police aren’t doing this because they’re tyrannical,” Chief Monahan recalled telling the group. “They’re doing it because it’s something that we need to do to get out of this pandemic.”

The effectiveness of antiviolence messengers in bridging the trust gap between the police and the public was evident after Giovanni Otho was killed.

The police believe Mr. Otho, a 30-year-old janitor and father of three, was either a bystander or participant in a dispute that erupted during a dice game a few minutes before 1 a.m. on April 25. Investigators are still searching for the gunman, who wore a surgical mask and fled on foot after fatally shooting Mr. Otho and a 26-year-old man who survived, the police said.

The coronavirus pandemic forced Mr. Otho’s family to scrap plans for a horse-drawn hearse to carry Mr. Otho’s body through the streets of Harlem on May 2. Instead the family planned a small tribute on the block of West 143d Street where Mr. Otho had grown up. But hundreds of people showed up, apparently unaware the procession had been canceled.

The police were required to break up the gathering. But a local state assemblyman, Al Taylor, called in Ms. Sekou to help defuse the situation.

Ms. Sekou, who was shopping for supplies with her staff in New Jersey, hurried back to Harlem, where they handed out bags muscle pain, sore throat, headache and a new loss of the sense of taste or smell as symptoms to look out for. Most people fall ill five to containing masks and gloves and encouraged people to keep their distance from one another.

The police gave Mr. Taylor a microphone from a squad car, which he handed to Mr. Otho’s stepmother to say a prayer. She urged people not to take revenge for Mr. Otho’s killing. Then the family released a cluster of balloons. The crowd quickly dwindled.

The police were “very respectful,” Mr. Otho’s widow, Brittney Williams-Otho, 30, said. “Once we released the balloons, they were like, ‘OK guys, we still need you to practice social distancing.’”

For Mr. Otho’s sister Raquel, the moment was cathartic. “For me, it meant the world because I felt like I needed to do something for him,” she said.

Ashley Southall is a law enforcement reporter focused on crime and policing in New York City. @AshleyatTimes