



(Photo: Judy Griesedieck)

THE YEAR IN PREVIEW

One Street in Minnesota Separates Radically Different Policing Strategies

Minneapolis police are facing criticism for racism and abuse. They might learn from their counterparts just across the city line.

« THE YEAR IN PREVIEW »



DEC 14, 2015



Mark Obbie is a Contributing Editor at *The American Lawyer*, a former Soros Justice Media Fellow, and the former director of the Carnegie Legal Reporting Program at the S.I. Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University.



When Minneapolis police shot and killed Jamar Clark on November 15, he was [the 1,001st person](#) and [the 29th unarmed black man](#) in the

U.S. to die at the hands of police in 2015. Most of these deaths passed with barely any notice. A few became the focus of substantial protests and national media attention. Clark's was one of those.

A year after a Missouri grand jury declined to charge the officer who killed Michael Brown, sending Ferguson and much of the nation into a fresh round of public demonstrations, protesters in Minneapolis blocked a major freeway, marched on City Hall, and braved pepper spray—as well as the bullets of apparent counter-demonstrators—to express anger and frustration over police misconduct and abuse.

Leading the charge was the city's newest civil rights leader, a charismatic law professor named Nekima Levy-Pounds. For months Levy-Pounds had warned that all it would take was a single spark to turn Minneapolis into the next Ferguson. Jamar Clark was that spark. "We call Minneapolis a tale of two cities: The best of times if you're white, and worst of times if you're black," she told The Associated Press three days after Clark died.

FULL COVERAGE: [How 2015 Changed the Future](#)

In 2015, police leaders came to recognize these public outcries and the unrest that followed them as unmistakable signs of lost trust that could no longer be dismissed as isolated incidents of bad people in bad places behaving badly. That recognition has led to a widespread search for methods of mending relations between police and the communities of color and poverty most imperiled by crime. In many places—New York, Baltimore, Cleveland, Chicago, and now Minneapolis, to name the most notorious—whatever good intentions as may exist have not been a strong enough firewall to contain the spreading rage against police abuses. But not far from where Clark died, an inner-ring Minneapolis suburb has improved community relations while slashing crime rates by adopting a strategy entirely different from those cities'.

A TakePart mini-documentary follows the first Somali American police officer in Columbia Heights, Minn.

That strategy comes into focus in a darkened stairwell of a shabby apartment duplex in Columbia Heights, Minn., as Officer Mohammed Farah clomps up to the second floor and raps on an apartment door. “Hello? It’s the police department.” A young woman in a hijab cracks open the door and peeks out. “It’s not a problem,” Farah assures her. Then he switches from English to Somali to explain why he’s there.

Months earlier, in April, Farah and his colleagues in the Columbia Heights Police Department awakened to a disturbing realization. Federal authorities had charged six young Minneapolis-area men with plotting to fight for the Islamic State in Syria. One of them was a 19-year-old from Columbia Heights, yet the cops had no grasp on the neighborhood he came from.

The street where the suspect lived, Circle Terrace Boulevard, had turned over in recent years from mostly African Americans in the traditional sense to mostly Somali refugees, part of a resettlement to Minnesota that started in the 1990s. Low-cost rental housing attracted impoverished newcomers, many with children. Once considered a crime hot spot, with constant 911 calls, the street had gone silent. But as the federal criminal complaint showed, the lack of calls didn’t prove all was well; it only meant residents weren’t looking to the police for help. The police sought to get to know the neighborhood, through meetings, a neighborhood picnic, and an anonymous survey.

Anti-Muslim backlash had infected nearby suburbs, but in this instance Columbia Heights officials resolved, in the words of City Manager Walter Fehst, to “fight terrorism and despondency by providing the antidote: opportunity for a better life.”

Based on what they learned, Columbia Heights police proposed using three contiguous vacant lots the city owned to build a \$250,000 community center that would serve as a neighborhood meeting place and recreational hub.

That’s what pulls Farah, the department’s first Somali American police officer, out of his patrol car to spend an unseasonably warm October afternoon on a “knock-and-talk” on Circle Terrace, going door-to-door

to hand out fliers and update residents on the campaign to raise donations and grants to pay for the center.

Next to the tiny, forlorn playground that will be upgraded as part of the development, Farah approaches Ibo Hassan as she ushers her children off the school bus and into their apartment. Recognizing Farah from a picnic the police hosted in July, she warms up immediately. After Farah offers his spiel, she gives her blessing. “*Insh ’allah*. Thank you, guys, so much.” Her two-year-old and first grader roughhouse happily around her feet while Hassan tells Farah how eager she is to see the playground improved. She says, “Thank you for keeping the area safe.”

To have cops address public safety with a solution that’s more about community building than law enforcement speaks to a radically different take on policing. Called “community-oriented policing,” it enjoyed a phase of popularity and federal funding in the 1990s but soon dwindled to little more than a buzzword (if not being altogether forgotten) in most places. But in the wake of Ferguson and Baltimore, it’s getting a second look.

The Columbia Heights P.D. went all-in on the strategy in 2009. It is now seeing positive results: Crime has fallen by half, excessive force complaints are nearly nonexistent (although one CHPD officer was placed on administrative leave for a Nov. 24 fatal shooting and the victim’s family raised questions about the use of force). Locals’ trust of the police is at a level Minneapolis isn’t likely to attain anytime soon.



Columbia Heights Police Chief Scott Nadeau. (Photo: Judy Griesedieck)

Starting more than 20 years ago, police nationwide embraced community-oriented policing as the balm for their broken relationships with residents. The idea was simple: Walking a beat and chatting up residents would build stronger relations and avoid the sort of anger that the not-guilty verdict for the officers who beat Rodney King uncapped in Los Angeles in 1992. By the end of the 1990s, most police departments across the nation, flush with billions in federal grants, employed community-oriented-policing specialists and proclaimed it a part of their core mission.

As federal money shifted to antiterrorism policing after 9/11, community-oriented policing morphed in many places into the same tactics it was meant to displace. One element of the strategy, known as “broken windows,” aimed to address signs of disorder that some research indicated led people to see dilapidated parts of town as havens for lawbreakers, and discouraged upstanding citizens from resisting criminal elements. But when an arrest was seen as the means of fixing a window, community policing became a meaningless shell.

In reports released this year, the [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#) and the [President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing](#) argued that true community-oriented policing—sometimes known as problem-oriented policing—depended on its becoming ingrained in an entire

department's culture, not relegated to a few Officer Friendlies on bikes. **The case for its effectiveness** as a tool to build better community relations is clear, when it's done right. (Less certain are its crime-reduction benefits.)

That's where broken windows and its offspring, "stop-and-frisk," have wreaked havoc. By policing high-crime neighborhoods in overly aggressive ways, police end up waging war against entire communities. A damning report released this year singled out Minneapolis for having done that, systematically, for years. A police department that fundamentally understands its purpose solves underlying problems—it fixes broken windows—but it is able to identify those problems because of strong community relations. The alternative is to simply react after a problem turns into a crime, or go looking for crimes. The problem with these strategies, some experts contend, is that police then interact only with the criminals in the community—and soon everyone in the community starts to look like a criminal.

In the wake of Ferguson and Baltimore, community-oriented policing is Topic A in Minneapolis, whose embattled police department says it knows it needs to climb out of the hole it has dug for itself. But saying that isn't the same as transforming a police department into one that looks for people to help rather than people to arrest—so that ultimately it has fewer people to arrest. To see what that looks like, Minneapolis police need only look at what's happening on their northern flank in Columbia Heights.

It's way different here. We need cops. We need
good cops.

ZUBAIR SIRAACH, 15, COLUMBIA HEIGHTS, MINN.

”

The Columbia Heights High School gym echoes with the thuds of a dozen basketballs. Teens come and go during a two-hour open gym. As many as 50 kids, mostly boys, mostly black, socialize or race up and

down the court, showing off dunking and blocking, throwing the occasional elbow.

There's no ref here. But there is one slightly paunchy, bald, white cop. Jason Piehn, a 10-year veteran of the CHPD, lumbers around the gym in full police gear—the clunky black shoes, the stifling bulletproof vest, the clanking utility belt and pistol—playing ringleader to this weekly event meant to give the kids some exercise, some unstructured fun, and a healthy alternative to hanging out on the streets.

“Street ball at its finest,” Piehn says, cackling, as the pickup game roars past his perch on the sidelines. When he's not appreciating the athletes, he's hanging with the slackers, occasionally herding the disengaged back into the action. Piehn does it all with a light touch. He's not here to bust chops.

Piehn grew up in tiny Harmony, Minnesota, where everyone knew the entire police department, consisting as it did of a chief and two part-timers. In Columbia Heights, Piehn has worked patrol, crime investigations, and drug enforcement. Starting this school year, he took on a new duty as school resource officer—the high school's on-duty cop.

When Columbia Heights Police Chief Scott Nadeau asked everyone in the department to take on a social assignment in the community in 2009—regular meetings with landlords, senior citizens, or business owners; Neighborhood Watch and “coffee with a cop” get-togethers; or kid-focused activities—Piehn was one of the officers who jumped at the opportunity. For others, it has taken years of slow attitude adjustment—enough so that Nadeau needed to make a requirement of what had been a volunteer program. Now, Piehn says, most see the assignments as “a way of life rather than an order.”

[RELATED](#)



How I Became an Activist

Watching kids have fun in the gym and getting to know them in the school hallways gives Piehn a better outlook on his job and on the city he polices. “I go home a lot happier—I know that—after a school day than I did after a patrol shift,” he says.

The lessons flow both ways, as they’re meant to. Zubair Siraach, a 15-year-old sophomore and son of Somali refugees, on a breather from the pickup game, says that in Columbia Heights he sees nothing like the anger toward police he sees in the news. “It’s way different here,” he says. It’s taught him that “we need cops. We need good cops.”

When Nadeau took charge in 2008, the police—and the city—were in far worse shape. Department morale was low, and crime was higher than in demographically comparable places. While the rest of the country was enjoying a historic drop in crime, the robbery rate in Columbia Heights more than doubled and property crime rose by half between 2000 and 2007. By 2008, youth arrests hit an all-time high. Then came a second wave of Somali refugees and the foreclosure crisis, producing a more transient and disconnected population. Doubters started calling the city “Crumbling Heights.”

The city’s all-white, mostly male force of 26 officers was policing its 20,000 residents with methods stuck in the past. The community-oriented-policing program the department started in the 1990s, when

federal money flowed, had shriveled to “wave-and-grin” superficialities, Nadeau says. “Our police officers were mobile report takers. They essentially would drive around and wait for a radio call.” With crime rates climbing, they didn’t have to wait long. The pace fed the adrenaline junkies on the force, for whom policing meant only catching bad guys. But at the end of the shift, nothing much had changed except the cops’ ever-lower impression of the city’s residents, based only on all the trouble they encountered.

To see and hear the spit-and-polish 49-year-old Nadeau now, with his graduate degree and perfect salt-and-pepper coif, it’s easy to picture an ambitious technocrat impatiently yanking a tired department into his vision of the future. But, say officers past and present, Nadeau proceeded cautiously and deliberately.

Some of the changes amounted to a simple get-with-the-times upgrade, such as crime mapping to use real-time data in place of anecdotes to pinpoint problem areas. Nadeau’s most visible innovation, though hardly innovative as a concept, emphasized reaching out to the community in relaxed settings, outside the crucible of police calls, so that people who know and like individual officers will be more apt to reach out to police when they need help—or support the police in a crunch.

I am a target because I declared that I have rights. I shouldn’t feel fearful if I see the police behind me.

ALAN MORRISON, 51, MINNEAPOLIS

”

Not everyone was comfortable with the changes in the early going. One officer told researchers from the University of St. Thomas, in Minneapolis, who studied the Columbia Heights program that his first reaction was, “This is bullshit.” Others called it social work in place of real policing.

Eventually, most cops signed up for many more hours than the minimum 10 per year (in part because they’re allowed to do the work

during their regular shift hours or as paid overtime). “Everybody doing something is preferable to a couple of people doing everything,” concluded a department report on the program released this year. In contrast to the rank-and-file’s reaction to the rollout, when the program coordinator stepped down last year to return to street patrol, several officers applied to replace him.

On patrol one afternoon in his marked SUV, Sgt. Justin Pletcher points out Columbia Heights landmarks. “We used to have a lot of issues on this block,” he says. “But I haven’t been here in, I don’t know, six months, probably.” On another block in a predominantly African American neighborhood, Pletcher, a 35-year-old Iraq war veteran, notes, “This is probably our highest producer of police calls right here.” That’s why he chose it for the first on-site “eat and greet.” Police invited the neighborhood, promising a cookout and a puppet show for the kids. At the start, residents peered out of apartment windows wondering what the cops were doing. A few ventured outside. Others followed, until as many as 100 people mingled with a small group of cops. “By the end,” Pletcher says, “we were all sitting down sharing hamburgers and pops and having a conversation.”

Perhaps the most striking change in Columbia Heights policing, in light of the death of Freddie Gray and the subsequent demonstrations and rioting in Baltimore this year, is measured by what’s not happening, rather than by what is.

In a city with high poverty, ticketing a driver for an expired registration or lack of insurance only digs a deeper money pit and likely turns today’s citation into tomorrow’s warrant. This is what might be called income-oriented policing, and it’s what the [Department of Justice cited the Ferguson](#) Police Department for in a scathing report released in March. Better to let the driver go with a warning, at least until too many warnings stack up. “We aren’t out there just citing willy-nilly,” Nadeau says.

RELATED



How Black Lives Matter Reshaped the Traditional Narrative About Police Killings

His officers are trained problem solvers, not “robotic” enforcers, he says. That means, for example, when they confront chronic problems—a serial runaway teen, or a shady set of characters in a house drawing numerous complaints—they apply protocols designed to drill down to what’s really going on. Drugs? Mental illness? Child abuse? Then, instead of treating the symptoms—thefts, fights, flight—they can call in needed services, from building code enforcement to counseling to health care. Arrest should be a last resort. Serious crimes, of course, still get handled as they would in any city. But by cultivating neighbors and businesses as an early-warning system, police have been able to head off cycles of catch-and-release.

The crime spurt here in the early 2000s ran counter to national and regional trends, but since Nadeau’s arrival in 2008, serious crimes have been cut in half across all categories, reaching a 30-year low in 2014 and outpacing downward trends. At the same time, steep drops in the numbers of adults and youths arrested or cited for offenses, and persistently low numbers of citizen complaints about excessive force, paint a clear picture of a police force less reliant on handcuffs or brute strength.

A complex and often opaque set of variables, from changing demographics to the whims of where a drug crew next sets up shop,

drives crime rates. But there's such a strong correlation between the start of the program and the positive trend lines that it's hard to argue that the department's change in tactics had little to do with making Columbia Heights less dangerous.

There's no doubt that residents feel the change. In a survey last year, 86 percent of those responding agreed the police have a good relationship with locals. The numbers were even higher when they were asked whether they agree that police "will act on my problem or need when I call" and whether they are "comfortable contacting/working with" the police.

Says Nadeau, "The interactions that our officers are having are fundamentally different than they were five or six years ago." Pletcher hears a siege mentality when he talks to cops in other departments. "Yeah, I'm another racist cop," they moan to him. "Well, I don't get called that," Pletcher says. "They don't feel we're out to get them anymore."



Police moved thousands of Black Lives Matter protesters out of the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, after they disrupted holiday shoppers on Dec. 20, 2014. (Photo: Adam Bettcher/Getty Images)

Just across the city line, a different story has taken hold in Minneapolis. Though the police don't use the terms "stop-and-frisk" or "broken windows" to describe their approach, those are in effect the tactics they use to blanket black and Latino neighborhoods with intense policing

that alienates the law-abiding majority, say the activists and monitors who have been battling police abuse for years without much to show for it.

Behind every public flare-up like the Jamar Clark case, they say, are legions of cases like Alan Morrison's. The 51-year-old single father tells his story in his cluttered South Minneapolis home while trying to occupy a busy two-year-old son. Construction tools and debris litter the front porch and entryway, signs of the work he has had to do to clean up the place after he and his family were evicted from a nicer house across the street.

Morrison says a child-protection worker came to that house to remove his teen daughter, based on allegations that grew out of Morrison's bitter custody battle with his ex. Police arrived. As he argued with them, he says, one officer jumped him from behind and put him in a choke hold, causing him to black out. As he was fighting charges in that case and pursuing a complaint against the officer for alleged excessive force, Morrison says, police stopped him while he was driving his work van, whose registration was 13 days expired. Instead of ticketing him, they towed the van. While he scrambled for money to get it out of the impound lot, the tools he needed for his work as a contractor disappeared. Then the lot sold his van even though Morrison had promised to show up the next day with the fees owed. Unable to work, he got evicted. "I was like, 'What else?'" he says.



Alan Morrison, of Minneapolis, with his son. His complaint of officer misconduct against Minneapolis police has been pending for months; a charge filed against him resulting from a

confrontation with police was dropped. (Photo: Mark Obbie)

Prosecutors ended up combining the two cases; the vehicle violation was resolved with a mild sanction, and the charges over the physical confrontation were dropped. Morrison got the city to reimburse him for some of his losses, but the check for just under \$3,000 was much less than the van and tools were worth. His brutality complaint was dismissed, and a second complaint of officer misconduct, over the van and tools, has been pending for months.

Once, in Saint Paul, an officer stopped Morrison's car and handcuffed him while he checked his ID. The officer told him he fit the description of a suspect and had to be handcuffed for the officer's safety. When it was over, the officer apologized for the intrusion. Morrison says he shook the officer's hand and thanked him for explaining himself. "He respected me, and that's all I ask," he says.

But since his encounters with the Minneapolis P.D., Morrison says, he looks over his shoulder whenever he leaves home. "I know that I am a target because I declared that I have rights," he says. "I shouldn't feel fearful if I see the police behind me. I'm 51, with no criminal record. Imagine if I did have one." (The police referred all questions about Morrison to the City Attorney's Office, which confirmed the financial settlement but had no comment on the rest of his story.)

Morrison's case speaks to two of the key factors that divide the people of Minneapolis from their police and Minneapolis police from Columbia Heights': a distrusted police-disciplinary system and an approach to policing that emphasizes arrests for minor offenses—and ends up ensnaring people of color far more often than whites.

These problems are deeply embedded in the Minneapolis P.D. One former police chief [told Human Rights Watch](#) back in 1998 that the department he took over in 1980 was "damn brutal." Officers with reputations as "thumpers," quick with their fists when dealing with suspects, were legendary. After federally mediated talks prompted by several controversial fatal shootings by police, the city agreed in 2003 to form a 30-member police-community relations council to work out new policies on use of force, minority hiring, and other issues. Within

five years it collapsed in acrimony. The problems persist. Brutality and other forms of misconduct have cost Minneapolis taxpayers nearly \$19 million over the past decade in payouts to aggrieved citizens, according to the City Attorney's Office, and a [U.S. Justice Department review this year](#) of the city's systems of police discipline found officers rarely faced serious consequences for misconduct (though it commended the city for working toward dismissing fewer complaints outright). The city is working on a plan to fix the problems—again.

Coinciding with the Justice Department review, the American Civil Liberties Union dropped an even more disturbing report on the city. It [documented a pattern of racially biased arrests for low-level offenses](#) that the ACLU called “staggering.” Based on 33 months' worth of arrest data from 2012–14, the ACLU found that blacks in Minneapolis are nearly nine times more likely than whites to be arrested for minor, nonviolent offenses.

One example: Blacks were targeted 25 times as often in nearly 4,000 arrests for loitering with intent to commit a narcotics offense (a violation that can be enforced even in the absence of drugs). Other common charges prone to abuse included driving without car insurance and violations under city ordinances against “lurking” or spitting in public. These can exacerbate a wide gap between whites in the city and everyone else that shows up in a host of [economic and employment indicators](#) and is pervasive in the criminal-justice system, where [the state prisons have five times the share of blacks as the general population](#).

The two ordinances became the target of a repeal campaign. In that fight, as in practically every other local controversy lately over racial justice, the activist taking the lead was 39-year-old law professor Nekima Levy-Pounds.



Nekima Levy-Pounds addresses a candlelight vigil held for Jamar Clark, who was killed by Minneapolis police, outside the MPD 4th Precinct on Nov. 20. (Photo: Stephen Maturen/Getty Images)

Sweeping into a conference room at the downtown Minneapolis civil rights law clinic she founded, she is a bit breathless and rushed—which describes her life over the past year.

In November 2014, Levy-Pounds got a taste of tear gas at protests in Ferguson, where she served as a National Lawyers Guild legal observer but ended up in the thick of the street action.

The next month, back in the Minneapolis area, she played a prominent role as a Black Lives Matter legal adviser and spokesperson at one of the group's most audacious protests, a thousands-strong occupation of the Mall of America that disrupted Christmas shopping. That earned her criminal charges, along with 10 others, as an alleged organizer of the event. "I didn't consider myself to be an organizer," says Levy-Pounds, who teaches at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. But if that was how law enforcement wanted to see her, she was willing to oblige.

In May, members of the local NAACP chapter elected Levy-Pounds president on a platform of "Enough is enough," even as she keeps one foot in Black Lives Matter. Reformers' protests forced a repeal of the ordinances on spitting and lurking; their next goals are a range of criminal justice reforms centering on the kinds of problems the ACLU flagged.

On Nov. 10, a judge dismissed Levy-Pounds' charges from the mall protest. The following week, she was among the first arrested for blocking Interstate 94 in the hours after Jamar Clark's death.

With that kind of opposition, one might expect the Minneapolis police chief to be an intransigent good old boy. But it's Janeé Harteau, a career Minneapolis police officer and the department's first female chief, not to mention its first married lesbian chief. She once brought a discrimination complaint against the department for alleged harassment of her and the police officer she eventually married (the department made reforms in training and in how internal complaints get handled). As a member of the Police Executive Research Forum, the Major City Chiefs Association, and the [new Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration](#), Harteau has a resumé that sports [the trifecta of bullet points for elite, modern policing](#), and she has stocked the department's executive ranks with like-minded managers: One of her deputy chiefs, Medaria Arradondo, sued the department eight years ago for race discrimination against black officers in assignments and promotions.



Outside the 4th Precinct police station on Nov. 20, Minneapolis Police Chief Janeé Harteau (right) speaks with citizens protesting the killing of Jamar Clark. (Photo: Stephen Maturen/Getty Images)

Calling their reform agenda “MPD 2.0,” Harteau and company have hit many of the right notes. The department, though only slightly whiter than the city as a whole, is making an aggressive push to diversify. City arrest data this year, through October, show a concerted effort to shift

enforcement away from lower-level offenses—arrests for those are down 19 percent—toward “positive contacts,” such as walking a beat or attending a community meeting. Harteau has imposed department-wide training in racial sensitivity, agreed to be more transparent about who’s stopped on the street by police and why, eased up on a punitive approach to curfew violations, and won recognition for a [community-oriented policing program in the city’s main Somali neighborhood](#)—everything the police in neighboring Columbia Heights would have recommended, if leaders of 800-officer departments listened to chiefs of 27-officer departments.

After the publication last year of a preliminary version of the ACLU report, Harteau appeared in [an MPD-produced YouTube video](#) promising prompt action and thanking the ACLU for uncovering “concerning” evidence of racial bias. “That is unprecedented for our policing work,” says Emma Andersson, a staff attorney with the ACLU’s Criminal Law Reform Project and the report’s lead author.

The department's a dismal record on discipline and racial disparities, and the discord in the community, will be difficult to overcome. After years of frustration over failed promises, Michelle Gross of Communities United Against Police Brutality has low expectations for such efforts. She says the system remains “phony as all hell.” ACLU of Minnesota Legal Director Teresa Nelson points to a disconnect between good intentions at the top of the department and street officers at the bottom. “I think actually getting those changes and having them filter from the top down is definitely a challenge,” she says.

Harteau hinted at another major impediment when she appeared [on a Minnesota Public Radio call-in show](#) after the publication of the ACLU report in May. After ticking off a list of community-oriented policing tactics she favored, Harteau cautioned that the priority still must be responding to serious crimes. “You tell me,” she challenged the host. “Where should my officers be?”

sign up for the takepart features email

Add context and dimension to the issues you care about with personal stories and gripping long form narratives reported from the inside of where news is



happening.

Submit

By submitting the form above, you agree to TakePart's [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). You can unsubscribe at any time. Contact us [here](#).

On a late October morning outside Karmel Mall, a Somali market on Minneapolis' Southside, young and middle-aged men stand on the sidewalk discussing recent a neighborhood homicide two days earlier, the city's fifth in one week. The following day, Harteau and other department brass had descended with a burst of tweets and a caravan of police vehicles trailed by news cameras. The police leaders' message on the street, also [trumpeted on the department's new PR platform](#): They won't rest until they solve this and many other open cases of homicide in Somali neighborhoods.

Two of the men outside the mall, Mohammed Aidarus and Ishmeal Mohamed, scoff at the police chief's visit. In their everyday interactions, they say, police treat the entire neighborhood with suspicion and yet fail at their most fundamental task: solving murders.

Mohamed, who owns a local grocery store, says, "If I move my car over here without insurance or with plate number expired, they find me right away. How they don't find somebody who killed people?" Aidarus, pointing to the surveillance cameras sprouting from multiple utility poles, chimes in: "Everywhere there's cameras. And last two months, what happened here, I think three people or four people they kill here. This area! And they couldn't find it."

When police only react to emergencies and don't get out of their patrol cars to mingle, they can't know the people or the neighborhood, Aidarus says. "They have to communicate with the people, and then they'll figure out who's the good people, who's a bad person."



Columbia Heights officer Terry Nightingale. (Photo: Judy Griesedieck)

The afternoon that Columbia Heights Officer Mohammed Farah spends knocking on doors on Circle Terrace Boulevard to explain the police department's planned community center, he walks up to Ken Carroll, who is covered in white dust and stooped over at his front door, cutting drywall. Farah introduces himself as "Officer Mo" and tells him about the playground and community center. "I would like that," says Carroll, whose eight-year-old son now uses their short driveway as a play space. "That'll change things a lot."

Carroll avoided moving here many years ago when he had a chance, because of the street's bad reputation. But when he heard that police had turned things around—and when a foreclosed property came on the market at a good price—Carroll made his move. He now rents half of his duplex to a Somali man and says the influx of immigrants has largely been a plus for the neighborhood. "So yeah," he says, "I've seen it change for the better."

A mosque in Columbia Heights dating to the 1960s, the oldest in Minnesota, hosts an annual barbecue for police and firefighters to thank them for their service. These police, says Muslim community leader

Shah Kahn, understand that Muslims want to be a part of the community and not stand apart. “They are reaching out,” he says. “They are coming to us.”

Degha Shabbeleh, a teacher and mother of four in Columbia Heights, says her fellow Muslims cringe at the anticipated backlash when news breaks of an Islamic State indictment or a public eruption of hate speech. It’s only natural that their fear extends to the police. After all, “men in uniforms,” as she puts it, terrorized her people in Somalia. But that doesn’t happen in Columbia Heights, at least not anymore.

When she heard that the department was hiring two officers with East African roots, including Farah, Shabbeleh organized a welcome party, inviting residents and cops. “I was quite excited about it,” she says. “It means a lot.”

After dashing back to the police station for evening roll call, Farah tells his sergeant he’s returning to Circle Terrace. He has more doors to knock on.

Editor’s Note: This story has been updated to include details of a Nov. 24 fatal shooting of a suspect by Columbia Heights Police.

« THE YEAR IN PREVIEW »

[« PREVIOUS](#)

**From Courtrooms to Bathrooms,
Trans People Made Major Progress
in 2015**

[NEXT »](#)

**Sexual Assault Survivors Are
Asking: Campus or Courtroom?**

More on TakePart



**Law Aims to Track
Police-Community
Relations Before They
Reach the Boiling
Point**



**Go Directly to Jail:
Typical Teens Face
Police Instead of
Principals**



The Year In Preview

**The Climate Generation Takes to the Streets:
Enough Is Enough**

[WATCH MORE VIDEOS »](#)

About Us

TakePart — a digital news & lifestyle magazine and social action platform for the conscious consumer — is a division of Participant Media, the company behind [Pivot](#) Television Network and important films such as *Lincoln*, *Contagion*, *The Help*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *Food, Inc.*, *Waiting For “Superman,”* *CITIZENFOUR* and *An Inconvenient Truth*. Learn more about [Participant Media](#).

follow us



[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Social Action Network](#) | [RSS](#) | [Interest-Based Ads](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

 participant
media

 pivot

 takepart