



Training teaches police officers techniques for interacting with neighborhood youth in ways that defuse hostilities and encourage dialogue.

MARK I. SINGER



__APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

POLICE LEARN TO WORK WITH NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH TO CURB VIOLENCE

Police officers who patrol city streets often do not realize that many children and adolescents in those neighborhoods live every moment of their lives anxiously awaiting the next threat to their safety. The youths are hyper-alert to their environment and quick to react to any posture they perceive as a threat.

According to **Mark I. Singer, Ph.D.**, professor of social work at Case's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, police officers who get tough with neighborhood youth who are not committing any crimes are increasing, not decreasing, the potential for conflict. The reason is that many of these young people have been exposed to violence, as victims and witnesses, and these experiences have conditioned their brains for a very fast fight-or-flight response—either of which can be dangerous.

Dr. Singer has been studying the effects of exposure to violence on children and adolescents for more than a decade. In sharing his expertise on violence prevention with the community, he conducts youth-focused police training with the Partnership for a Safer Cleveland, an agency that is dedicated to reducing youth violence. The training teaches police officers techniques for interacting with neighborhood youth in ways that defuse

hostilities and encourage dialogue by providing officers with interpersonal skills that they can use in non-arrest situations. The program has trained more than 1,600 Cleveland police officers with a four-hour curriculum that includes a training video featuring police officers and adolescents who re-enact a scenario that was actually recorded during Dr. Singer's field work.

"We teach the officers that they are more like the youths than they realize," Dr. Singer says. "The youths have been exposed to violence, and the police have been exposed to violence. Their brains react similarly. They're both ready for a potential conflict. The interpersonal skills that we teach help reduce the potential of negative outcomes."

Dr. Singer, a national authority on youth violence, is also the co-director of the Center on Substance Abuse and Mental Illness at the Mandel School. Two of his other research projects that inspired the police training involve the study of violent behavior in severely emotionally disturbed children and the relationship between children's threats of violence and violent behaviors.

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