



Detroit Police Department  
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NEWS RELEASE

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A STATEMENT BY POLICE COMMISSIONER JOHN F. NICHOLS ON THE STRESS OPERATION

The STRESS operation was organized in January of this year and put into operation in February as a direct response to a crime situation that had made robbery the most feared and most rapidly increasing crime in the city. It is also bloody, accounting for 75 murder victims in 1969, and 85 in 1970.

Robbery is a calculated crime for profit, not passion, in which violence or the threat of violence is used on a victim, who is picked by the robber chiefly because he or she is accessible and appears to be easy prey.

There were 13,774 robberies committed in Detroit in 1968. Last year the figure totaled 23,038, a 67 percent increase. Major crimes in Detroit rose 32 percent in the same period. In specific numbers, there were 38,990 more major crimes committed in 1970 than in 1968. Of this increase, robbery accounted for 24 percent.

So there was every reason, both factually and emotionally, to take the initiative in doing something effective to reduce this dangerous and prevalent crime.

Robberies dipped sharply in March, the month STRESS operations became fully effective. Robberies have been fewer than a year ago in six out of the first eight months of 1971 -- five out of the six months since STRESS was fully inaugurated.

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The only other major crime with a parallel record is larceny, a form of non-violent thievery which also may have been deterred by the publicity on STRESS operations. Homicides increased seven months out of eight, assaults and auto thefts six months out of eight, rape four months out of eight. Burglaries were less than a year ago five months out of eight.

Although some may say the evidence is not conclusive, if the STRESS operation has had an effect on crime in Detroit, that effect has been to reduce the crime against which it was directed.

In the course of the STRESS operation, officers taking the kind of risk that is involved in exposing yourself to dangerous individuals and allowing them to make the first move have been involved in 38 cases in which the officer has been injured. In the course of making 1,379 arrests, ten criminals have been shot fatally by officers. Meanwhile 44 innocent victims are known to have been killed by criminals in the course of robberies this year.

The directives in the Detroit Police Manual under which police officers are presently trained to operate, say that the officer must use his weapon only in extreme circumstances and with great caution. He is authorized to use his weapon in defense of his own life and the life of another, and to prevent the escape of criminals involved in the commission of certain specific crimes, including robbery.

The conditions in the streets on which STRESS officers operate are such that most citizens are afraid to be out. Even armed police officers have every reason to be apprehensive in view of the record levels at which crimes of violence are being committed, increasing

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attacks on police officers, and the number of fatal shootings of police -- six since the first of the year, a total exceeded only in the gangster days of the Prohibition period.

In the light of these facts, and these conditions, the pressures on the police to be both effective and restrained in what amounts to a war -- a war on crime -- are both intense, and seemingly opposed.

It is not the considered policy of the Police Department to be insensitive and callous about the loss of human life, or to be unconcerned where the community is very much concerned. We have not issued a license to kill to any officers in any units. Nor have we surrendered the streets to those whose desire to commit an assault or a robbery awaits only the opportunity and the appearance of a likely victim.

There is no "open season" on black people on the part of members of the Detroit Police Department. We are trying on three fronts to tackle crimes of violence, by seeking stronger gun ownership laws and better enforcement of existing laws; by catching the perpetrators of street violence in the act; and by taking direct action to dry up the narcotics traffic that contributes to both violent and non-violent crimes of theft.

The department has been trying in every way it can to accommodate the needs of all citizens, and especially black citizens who have been the principal victims of crimes. It has been trying in every way to remove the causes of suspicion between black citizens and police that may have existed in the past.

It would prefer never to be in the position of judge, jury and executioner, as may happen in a street response to a violent crime.

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It has widely publicized its operations to deal with these kinds of crimes, and there is little reason for a person stopped in the act of criminality to disbelieve that he is being confronted by a genuine police officer.

Once a criminal act has ended in the death of the criminal, all the remorse and regrets in the world cannot bring the individual back to life, or suspend the penalty that circumstance has already meted out. Society can only take a look at the conditions, and try to determine why it happened, and how it can be avoided in the future.

Many are saying that the way to avoid such irrevocable street punishments for crime is to carefully circumscribe the discretion of police officers. This we have already tried to do, in every way that we could think of. But no one can pass judgment on the ultimate discretion of an officer, who has not himself faced a visible or hidden threat of a knife, a gun or a physical attack, knowing that the difference between life and death for himself or the person he confronts may be simply a matter of timing.

But let us not only look at the police officer's discretion.

Let us also consider whether there are better ways in which the community can deter or eliminate crime, and ways of reaching the conscience and discretion of the criminal, especially the young, to prevent the kind of hair-trigger situations in which everybody's life is on the line -- criminal, victim, and police officer.