

# On the job: Life in the 28th Precinct, Part 1

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"We're doctors, lawyers, social workers; we go through the whole gamut," 21-year NYPD veteran Joel Ottley said during a brief moment of downtime at the 28th Precinct in Harlem. "You really have to tailor yourself to each situation," he added with a smile.

For the past 18 years Ottley has walked the streets of Harlem, maintaining law and order during the crack epidemic of the 1980's, and has stayed on through the second Harlem Renaissance, which has occurred in no small part

because officers like him have transformed what used to be the murder capital of New York, with more than 200 homicides a year, into a place so safe that apartments now sell for upwards of a million dollars.

While the neighborhood has changed, the job is still tough. As one of the precinct's youth officers, Ottley is responsible for the community's most precious resource: its young people. Truancy and in-school violence took up much of a recent patrol day, which he spent riding around the precinct with partner Paula Castro.

"As a youth officer you have to have much more patience," said Deputy Inspector Dwayne Montgomery, commanding officer of the 28th. "The people you are dealing with are more or less trying to discover themselves." During that process of self discovery many young people find themselves in a bad situation by being somewhere they shouldn't during school hours.

"That's when they get into trouble, hanging out on 125th Street when they're supposed to be in school," Ottley said as he approached Wadleigh High School on 114th St. As he

drove by, three young men bolted through a side door, catching the officer's attention.

"Hey you! Over there, come here!" he shouted after the unmarked patrol car lurched to a halt. Momentarily stunned, the young men looked at each other before complying with his order. "Let's see your school ID's. How old are you guys? What grade are you in and why aren't you in school?" Ottley asked in rapid fire, his voice transformed from an easygoing tenor to no-nonsense baritone in the blink of an eye. After taking their IDs and hearing a series of implausible stories, Ottley told the young

major problems at home. Sometimes Grandma is raising them but she can't control the kids so they end up getting into trouble," he said as they continued to patrol their assigned sector.

While the precinct has a large outreach program, centered around the Law Enforcement Explorers program, which educates young people between 14 and 21 about law enforcement and teaches them leadership skills, some youth still fall through the cracks. Those picked up for truancy in high school can graduate into handcuffs despite the best efforts of the officers charged with setting them on the straight and narrow.

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men to meet him around the corner at the school's entrance.

"And don't make me chase you guys. I have your ID's," he reminded as the car pulled away. "They always have a story," Ottley chuckled as he waited for the young men to turn the corner so he could take them back inside.

Despite their protests of innocence it turned out they were indeed trying to skip out early.

"We're very familiar with him," a school administrator said, pointing to the young man who appeared to be the leader of the band. All three had been in trouble or suspended for truancy in the past, and none looked particularly pleased with having been caught. As they were being processed for disciplinary action, Ottley pulled one of the young men aside.

"Look man, you're going to be 18 soon and then you can do whatever you want," he said in a hushed tone, hand on his shoulder in a fatherly gesture. "Just go to school and try to learn something; you don't want to be out on the street, trust me." The words seemed to fall on deaf ears as the young man attempted to appear tough.

Back out on the street, Ottley spoke of the difficulties that Harlem's youth face. "Some of these kids, they have

"Bloomberg's big thing is to do more with less so that's what we've been doing: a whole lot more with a whole lot less," Ottley said, a sentiment that was echoed several times during a week spent at the precinct. "Back then," Ottley continued, referring to when he came on the job, "we had a lot more help and a lot more manpower."

Despite what some in the department feel is a lack of resources, Ottley and his fellow officers have continued to work hard at creating what has become one of the safest precincts in New York. Whereas two decades ago he might be chasing down a suspected murderer or busting a heroin dealer, Ottley, in addition to his duties as a youth officer, now spends his day encouraging bicyclists to use the street instead of the sidewalk (it's both dangerous and illegal, according to the officer) and making sure the peddlers that line 125th Street are properly licensed and not blocking the flow of foot traffic.

"I love the job, I'm a very social person," he said after returning to the station. With 21 years on the force, Ottley could have already retired but plans on staying on for a little longer, if for no other reason than to give advice to new officers who are still learning what it means to be on the job.