

U.S. NEWS

To Spur Ties, Officers Move In Next Door

Illinois city's program offers free housing to police who live in the areas that they patrol

By SHIBANI MANTANI

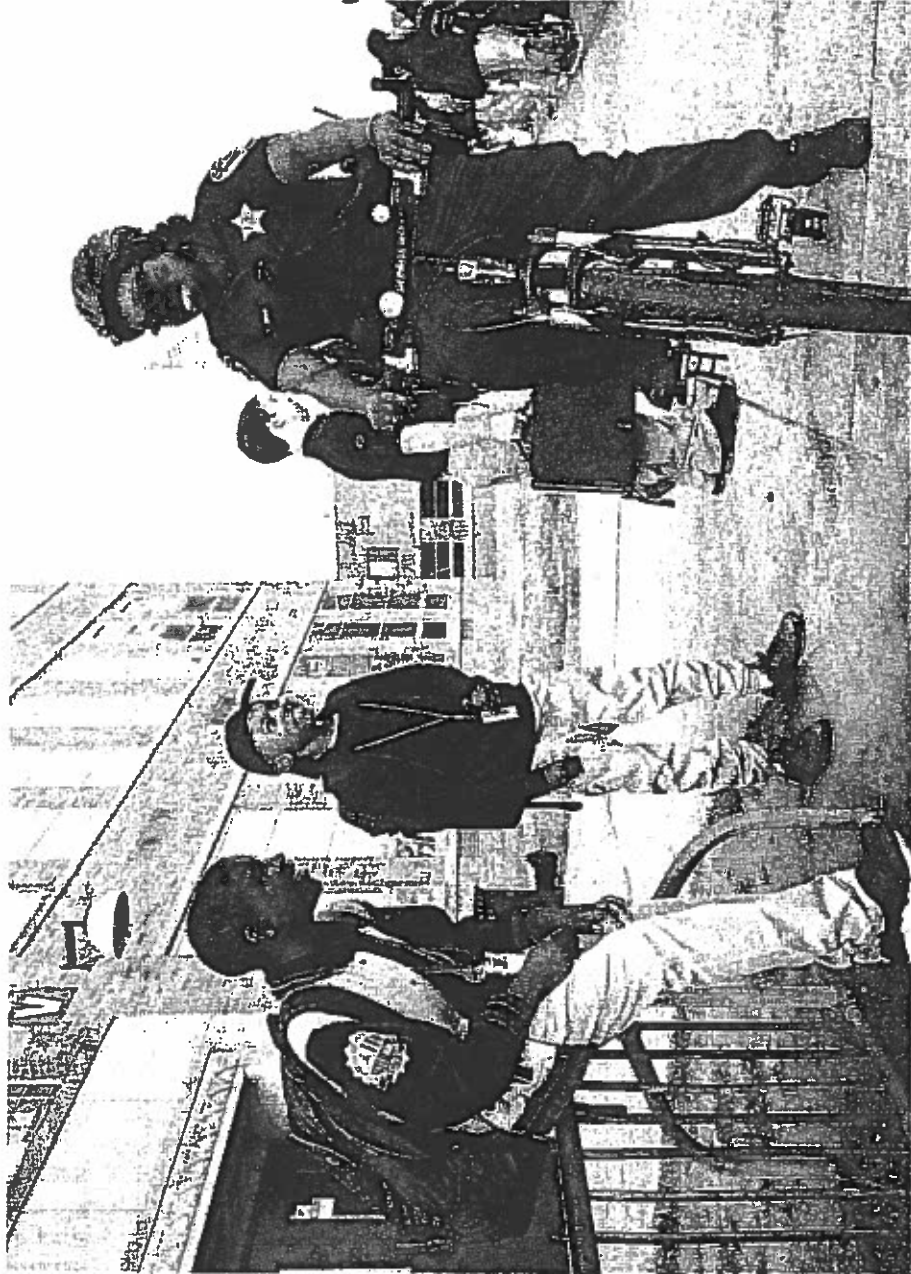
ROCKFORD, Ill.—Officer Patrice Turner starts her weekdays by getting on her bike and riding to West Middle School, greeting children and getting stragglers into the doors before they close.

On a recent day, she broke up a crowd gathered around a quivering palm-size baby bunny and before that, intervened before a quibble between some girls escalated.

free in these so-called ROCK Houses for anywhere between two and five years, the officers will get to know the problems of the people they protect by living among them.

"Their goal is to find problems in that neighborhood and solve it," said Dan O'Shea, chief of the Rockford police department. "Instead of going to one problem house three times a shift, the idea is that you go there once but that you try to solve the root cause of the issue—and you want to solve it, because you are two houses down."

The department, like many others across the country, is putting in place other community-policing initiatives. That



Officer Patrice Turner talks to sixth graders Demel Brown and Jai'lyn Dawson before they enter West Middle School for the day.

"You get to know the signs—that was about to be a fight," she says.

Officer Turner knows these students well. She doesn't just police here, but lives right down the street on Rockford's west side, a blighted neighborhood in a city with a murder rate that is three times that of Los Angeles and rivals the rates in Milwaukee and Chicago.

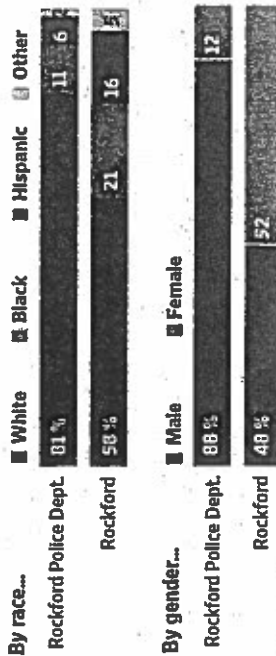
She is one of two officers to sign up to a new policing program here where officers live in the areas they patrol, rather than farther-flung, safer suburban enclaves. Living rent-

includes ice cream socials to bring children together with officers and creating what are known as "Strong Neighborhood Houses," where police and social-service agencies staff a house in a troubled neighborhood to give residents a place to report crimes and voice other concerns, and also host community events.

The resident officer program is described by criminologists as the most extreme form of community policing. It is in contrast to practices in many cities including Seattle, Fort Worth, Texas, and others that

Bridging Differences

A new policing program in Rockford, Ill., aims to bring the city's police officers, which are predominantly white and male, closer to residents.



Sources: Rockford Police Department; U.S. Census Bureau THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

From Neighbors To Better Cops

give it back." Eric Thurmond, another African-American officer in Rockford's program, is one of the youngest officers in the force

at 24, in his neighborhood on the east side of the city, where many residents have a history of drug addiction and where street gangs are prevalent, he says his focus is to reach out to the children. "Since I'm so young, I can relate to high schoolers," he said. Both officers spent the weeks before their moves knocking on doors in their neighborhoods and handing out their personal telephone numbers, a move many of their peers frowned at, fearful that someone who was arrested or given a ticket could use the in-

formation to retaliate. "It wasn't a big deal for me," said Officer Turner. "I don't like to live looking over my shoulder." For Corinne Gagliano, who lives two houses down from Officer Turner, the program is a welcome boost after years of rising violent crime. Her mother's house next door has been broken into twice over the past two years, she says. "There's so much violent crime in Rockford, I feel bad calling the police about something like a break-in or less than that," said Ms. Gagliano. "But in this instance, Officer Turner is right next door, and you can talk to him about it when you see him."

—Shibani Mantani

took some negotiation to get the police union on board, say those in the Rockford department. The primary concern was the safety of the officers and what the department is doing to protect the homes, which are outfitted with cameras and alarm systems. Chief O'Shea admits that the ROCK Houses program

takes a special kind of officer, but believes there are more like Officer Turner. He plans to introduce at least six more houses over the next year. "Three hundred cops are not going to solve our violent crime problem," he said. "Three hundred cops plus a hundred thousand residents, that is what will help."

Introducing the program

gan, a professor at Northwestern University who has studied community policing.

Still, "police officers are individuals and have a lot of reason to be nervous about it," he said, adding that officers who step forward will often be "special officers or officers doing this under special circumstances."