

The Village Act

Being the son of a Dominican mother and Cuban father with Nigerian roots, and with over ten years of experience in non-profit and education, I need no convincing about the realities of systemic racism against minorities. Yet, while a national conversation is necessary, it must go down to the most local of levels to be effective. We need [forward-thinking change](#) to address this underlying problem at the root, otherwise, the dust will just settle back on top as soon as the protests quiet. The people are shouting their demands from the streets, and we need to echo these calls with aggressive actions to address systemic racism or risk deepening the country's dangerous divide.

The sustained Black Lives Matter protests is once again, forcing systemic racism into the national conversation, I can only hope that this time the outcome will be different. After President Obama, [I had hoped for some national healing, to cure this deep-rooted divide](#) and yield positive change. [Instead, I found myself](#) disappointed in our current state of affairs. People have grown so aggressive on their stance over whether or not systemic racism even exists that the rift is being felt in all branches of our social contract.

After living in District 16 of the Bronx for over 20 years, I have witnessed the effects of systemic racism all around me. Educational infrastructure, housing discrimination, and wage gaps that reflect both gender and race—these institutionalized obstacles in minority communities have created a unique set of problems that range from poverty and crime to mistrust and disconnectedness. The same old way of doing things is clearly failing our people. [We need progressive and inclusive initiatives that will prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable New Yorkers.](#)

When I saw how impactful both this pandemic and current civil discord have been on my community, I decided to leave the education sector and stand up for the forgotten residents of the South Bronx. Together with the support of my family, I am investing my whole self in this community, to match my activism with concrete actions through policy-making [and community leadership](#). This is why I am proposing “The Village Act.” The relationship between communities and the police who are meant to protect them is deteriorating before our eyes, and The Village Act addresses this relationship for both District 16 and the NYPD at large.

When I imagine a village, I see a small, tight-knit community with well-preserved customs and the occasional festival in celebration of their communal vitality. Members of a village feel

inspired to make an individual commitment towards the betterment of the whole and receive praise for their efforts. Elders pass down their accumulated knowledge to the youth, which society adapts to its changing generational needs. The village cultivates a dynamic social environment of respect and trust with the added benefit of its resulting security.

A village approach to law enforcement, therefore, sees community policing through this same dynamic vision. While the traditional village may lack modern conveniences, today's concern is not how to modernize a village, rather how to tackle contemporary societal issues with a village approach. This is what The Village Act attempts to accomplish.

Despite some pushback against it, the good news is that [polling reports](#) 60% of Americans do recognize the legitimacy of the message behind the BLM movement, and 55% feel major change is needed in policing systems. In New York, the call is just as great. In a recent [Siena College poll](#), 2/3 of New Yorkers surveyed viewed systemic racism as a serious problem, and Black voters favored defunding the police by 55%. [In order to make a longlasting change, we need to overcome the lack of police and community interdependency.](#)

In District 16, we are no exception. Recent violence in our own backyard has highlighted the need for action. Despite an increase in these tragedies, as [Bronx District Attorney Darcel Clark](#) put it, a pervasive “no snitch culture” prevents cooperation between the public and police. Trust between these parts of society has nearly disappeared. Now, Mayor de Blasio is [planning to increase NYPD policing in the Bronx](#) in response. This “same-old-solution” brute force without addressing the racism ingrained in our traditional policing structures is a bandaid [response](#) to a malignant tumor.

This is why The Village Act goes further. [Studies show](#) that the perception of trust in the authority of law enforcement is largely linked to public cooperation with police, as well as within the greater community. At the same time, perceived discrimination in law enforcement [has been shown](#) to be significantly detrimental to one's mental and physical well-being. The need to heal this relationship between police and the public has never been more [crucial](#).

The Village Act promotes a shared effort between these two social partners. Its proposals nourish mutual respect and dignity, [allowing](#) for all parties involved to feel heard, and ensure neutral and transparent decision-making. Both the public and police grow to trust [each others'](#) motives through this form cooperation. Law enforcement becomes once again a position of integrity, which fosters greater community engagement, a self-sustained cycle of positive feedback. Both parties work together now because they recognize their shared interests and values.

Among its major components, The Village Act calls for implicit bias training and educational workshops on the history of policing in minority areas, which will increase awareness of stereotypical thinking and provide law enforcement with daily tools to combat it. There needs to be an honest recognition of quotas and unwritten policy dictating individual officer actions so that they can be properly resolved and trust can take its place. Internal evaluations of a department's perceived effectiveness in this effort to engage the community will help ensure honest and transparent cooperation.

The Village Act also proposes a larger role for civilian oversight in law enforcement. It calls for more and diverse youth police programs to answer the need for “[safe havens and proper community space for the city's youth](#)”. It suggests establishing a range of work models with flexible shifts and a more balanced work/life relationship to attract more diverse candidates to the field of law enforcement. This integrative approach will nourish a healthy relationship between the public and police, with specific programs in place, as well, meant to keep it this way.

To solve the problem of systemic racism, the same old ways of doing business offer inefficient solutions because the problem itself is embedded into them. The Village Act takes an outside-of-the-box approach, where healing the relationship between the public and law enforcement is at the root. This is not only urgent for District 16 and the Bronx, but the relationship of the NYPD at large and the communities they serve. We must transform the image of police officers into one of trusted partners in safety and engage them with a motivated community effort so law enforcement can stand for, not against, a community's needs.