The Beat Intro (00:00):

Welcome to The Beat, a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice, featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines. The Beat provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics and community policing.

Jennifer Donelan (00:16):

Hello, I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. And welcome to another episode of The Beat. Today we'll be speaking with Paul Formolo, the Assistant Chief of the Milwaukee Police Department about an all hands on deck approach to reducing shootings in their city. The overarching objective of community policing is to gather information and establish partnerships and processes that support the proactive identification and prevention of crime, rather than be left simply to respond to crimes after they've been committed. Well, that may sound simple enough, it has not always been proven an easy thing to do. That is why American law enforcement is sitting up and taking notice of a process implemented by the Milwaukee Police Department to address homicides and shootings more effectively. Assistant Chief Formolo, thank you for joining us to discuss this new program and your process. And welcome to The Beat.

Paul Formolo (01:08):

You're welcome. It's definitely an honor to have this opportunity to speak with everyone here.

Jennifer Donelan (01:12):

And I may have misspoke, it may not be a new program, but we'll get into that. Before we do that, we ask everybody the same question when we start the show, which is, what got you into law enforcement in the first place?

Paul Formolo (01:23):

My personal reasons for getting into law enforcement was I just had this desire to serve my community. I started off with the military right after high school. And when I left the military, I felt that, you know, I still wanted to continue to serve my community, my country, and I felt law enforcement was a very good pathway to do that.

Jennifer Donelan (01:43):

And how long have you been in?

Paul Formolo (01:44):

I have been with them Milwaukee Police Department since December of 1996.

Jennifer Donelan (01:49):

Oh, good for you.

Paul Formolo (01:51):

Thank you.

Jennifer Donelan (01:52):

'96, gosh, I don't know why as of late, I'm trying to do math while talking aloud.

Paul Formolo (01:56):

Just o- just I'm in my 26 year now.

Jennifer Donelan (01:58):

Thank you. (laughing) People are probably seriously questioning my intelligence.

Paul Formolo (02:05):

(laughing)

Jennifer Donelan (02:05):

So before we start talking about this review process, let's sort of set the stage about Milwaukee for context. So it's on the western shore of Lake Michigan, it has a diverse population of about 570,000 people, it's about 90 miles north of Chicago, so that our listeners can sort of envision it in their minds. What is the homicide rate in this city?

Paul Formolo (02:28):

Well, it's certainly unprecedented, like other major cities across the country. We've unfortunately, since 2020 have consecutively set new records. Historically, the average homicide rate in this city was anywhere between 90 to a 110 homicides per year, but in 2020, we finished the year at over 190. And-

Jennifer Donelan (02:50):

Oh.

Paul Formolo (02:51):

... and, unfortunately for last year 2022, we just finished that 214 homicides.

Jennifer Donelan (02:57):

Oh, no.

Paul Formolo (02:58):

Yes, it's been challenging, very challenging. And I'm sure we can get into discussion later as to what we think the issues are here.

Jennifer Donelan (03:05):

Absolutely. I'd love to talk about that because as you said, it's probably situations and scenarios and reasons that we're seeing in areas across the country.

Paul Formolo (03:13):

Right.

Jennifer Donelan (03:14):

Very, very sorry to hear that. And for the families of those victims. And for your officers. That's not what they signed up to do, right? They sign up to try and prevent crime and save lives and loss of life is, one is too many.

Paul Formolo (03:26):

Absolutely.

Jennifer Donelan (03:26):

Let me also just ask for context. Do you happen to know like the number of non-fatal shootings you typically deal with or have been dealing with?

Paul Formolo (03:33):

Yeah, again, before 2020, we were probably in the lowest I had in all the 2000s around 400 non-fatal shootings a year. That exploded as well. In 2021, we finished at 873. It kind of planed out in 2020 at 877. So basically, is, you know, less than a 1% increase, but if you compare it to 2019-

Jennifer Donelan (03:57):

Doubled, right?

Paul Formolo (03:59):

... that's double. 100 percent yes.

Jennifer Donelan (03:59):

Right.

Paul Formolo (03:59):

Doubled.

Jennifer Donelan (04:00):

Yep, yep, yep. Okay, we'll get into that. So how about your department itself? About how many officers do you have there? I don't know if your district's precincts but how's the city broken up?

Paul Formolo (04:10):

Sure. The Milwaukee Police Department consists of seven districts within the city. We have approximately 1,600 sworn members our department. Our Criminal Investigation Bureau is centralized. We have seven divisions within our Criminal Investigation Bureau. Homicide, Violent Crimes Division, which is responsible for investigating the non-fatal shootings and General Crimes, which is mostly responsible for property crimes and robbery. We have a Fusion Division, Sexual Crimes Division, Forensics Division, and then our Special Investigations Division, which I'll discuss more about when we get into our public safety review.

Jennifer Donelan (04:46):

Before we get to that public safety review, what are the situations, the crime picture? You're talking about non-fatal shootings doubling, you're talking about homicides doubled when compared to previous historic numbers, what are you looking at? What's the crime picture there? What's fueling that? Guns?

Paul Formolo (05:02):

Absolutely. It's the firearms, the amount of firearms that are on our streets right now, unprecedented. We're experiencing a dramatic uptick with the polymer guns, the ghost guns, along with the extended magazines or the high capacity magazines. I get asked frequently why in 2022, we had 11% increase in homicides, but basically non-fatal shootings are flat. And generally people or individuals would use the non-fatal shooting metric as a means to kinda like gauge violence.

Jennifer Donelan (05:35):

Right.

Paul Formolo (05:35):

But this was kind of reverse in Milwaukee, so I explain it this way. Our shooting incidents are more lethal. There's a higher lethality now, simply because they're more guns introduced into these altercations with high capacity magazines. So statistically speaking, we have more lead in the air, the chances of more people getting shot and causing death has increased.

Jennifer Donelan (05:55):

Yeah. Okay. Again, not something unique just to Milwaukee.

Paul Formolo (05:59):

No, absolutely not.

Jennifer Donelan (06:01):

So what led to the public safety review? That's what you've called the practice, what led to this review process?

Paul Formolo (06:09):

Sure. The public safety review originated in our department in 2018. It was an alternative means to address crime compared to a CompStat. And the reason why we kinda drifted away from doing a CompStat-

Jennifer Donelan (06:23):

What is CompStat?

Paul Formolo (06:25):

Basically, it's short for computer statistics. CompStat, or computer statistics was basically using data to identify your hotspots, your problems, and then in deploying your resources to those areas. So basically, putting cops on dots, that was the name for it.

Jennifer Donelan (06:44):

Yep.

Paul Formolo (06:44):

You know, you know, you see, see the dots, put the cops there. So what that did, though, was fell right into the overpolicing narrative, with not really being able to justify or articulate properly to the

community, why we're there. And to the community, that looked like the police department was an occupational force, again, over policing and not really justifying it, I kinda compare it to whack-a-mole policing. We're just running around the neighborhood stopping everything that moves, doing random police work, which is gonna get you random results, all the while you're destroying legitimacy within the community.

Jennifer Donelan (07:18):

Okay, and you need that, you need them welcoming you and these efforts, because at the end of the day, nobody wants crime in their neighborhoods.

Paul Formolo (07:26):

Correct. Ultimately, the community doesn't want crime in your neighborhood, that is true. But they also don't want to be stopped for petty reasons over and over again.

Jennifer Donelan (07:34):

Correct. All right. So what is the public safety review process? What is it? Describe it.

Paul Formolo (07:40):

Sure. It's a process, basically, bringing in three major components, partnerships, law enforcement, our social partners, and our public health partners. And these other partners in the criminal justice system holistically, it also has a community engagement piece, and a research piece to it.

Jennifer Donelan (07:59):

I like that. You know, I'm seeing more and more departments incorporating academia, right?

Paul Formolo (08:03):

Yes.

Jennifer Donelan (08:04):

I mean, uusing all of this data, which is invaluable data, but no one's processing it and putting it together for you. So that's great. Okay, so just, again, you said social services...

Paul Formolo (08:15):

Yeah, partnerships with other law enforcement-

Jennifer Donelan (08:17):

Okay.

Paul Formolo (08:18):

... organizations, our social services, our Community Health Partners, and even research partners from the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Jennifer Donelan (08:26):

What's the community engagement piece?

Paul Formolo (08:27):

The community engagement piece, it's kinda broad. But within the public safety review, it's our Office of Violence Prevention is like our shop that we go to, if we want to make referrals, we send the referral to them, and then they will ensure that that referral goes to the right organization, 'cause as we all know, not every social service organization is fit to handle everything. For example, a young female offender is going to need different services than a young male offender. Typically, a young female pathway into crime was sexual abuse or assault. So we have to get them those specific services that would not necessarily be for a male.

Jennifer Donelan (09:05):

And I want to get into like, exactly like, what does the public safety review look like? Is it a folder with crimes, and it's sort of handed around to group to group and then there's a conclusion? Is that a room filled with people sitting around tables, having open conversations? What does that look like?

Paul Formolo (09:21):

So yeah, I'll start it off with the beginning. So we have an agenda. Obviously, every week, the agenda's set and we, throughout the week, kinda weigh in triage, which shootings are going to be reviewed. All homicides and shootings are not equal. Although they're traumatic, not every shooting's gonna justify the same response or resources from law enforcement or even from other portions of the criminal justice system.

Jennifer Donelan (09:45):

Is it one of those things like this shooting, there's really no service that would have supported or made an impact? Like this shooting is just sort of clear cut and there's no remedy with this particular case?

Paul Formolo (09:57):

Yeah, it could be something as simple as... I'll give you the perfect example of a shooting we most likely wouldn't review. You have two individuals that may have been consuming alcohol, passing a gun around, and jokingly, one points at his buddy and accidentally shoots him. You know, that one there, we would handle like informally, like, okay, either these individuals need like trauma informed care, or do they need substance abuse, and then we're done with it. Because the likelihood of retaliation or a furtherance of violence from that shooting is unlikely or very low. So we're looking at those shootings that have the highest propensity of retaliation or continued violence.

Jennifer Donelan (10:33):

So it's the rocks that make the ripples.

Paul Formolo (10:35):

Correct. Very good analogy. So once we get our agenda built up, we will then put a slide deck together or a PowerPoint together, we disseminate that to all of our partners. We're very transparent. I have no issues sharing any of this information with any of our partners, whether they're sworn or non-sworn. And that's very important to have that trust, and that transparency. I get asked frequently, "Aren't you worried somebody's gonna leak this stuff out to the media? Or are you jeopardizing the safety of witnesses, or undercover police officers?" We've been doing this for five years now, we've never had an incident like that.

Jennifer Donelan (11:09):

Do you think it's because by the sheer action of bringing these people into the fold, and that expectation of almost sanctity, that you get that buy in, everyone understands how important the process is, so no one's willing to threaten it?

Paul Formolo (11:25):

Yeah, that's correct. And obviously, if we ever have that breach of trust, we, we would deal with that on a individual basis.

Jennifer Donelan (11:32):

So it's the shootings, it could cause ripples, it's the one that could have consequences, effects. It's the homicides, that same situation. So you'd make a determination, you decide which cases and then what happens?

Paul Formolo (11:43):

So then we send that information out to everybody so that all of our partners and the people that are participate in this process have time to prepare and do their own research that's relative to their space, or within their lanes. And then we get together in person or virtually. So it's hybrid, just to maximize the participation 'cause everyone's got busy schedules. And we have our meeting every Wednesday at 1:30. And we start off the meeting, usually with just kind of going over some stats, statistics, and then we get into what we call the accountability piece. And this is very important if you are gonna institute this type of model in your organizations, you got to have an accountability piece where everybody's mutually accountable to each other.

(12:22):

So what that means is in the previous week, if an agency whether its the FBI, ATF, probation, parole, if they took on a task, or what we call a deliverable, you are expected to report back on that deliverable the next week, as to what you accomplished, did it work? Did it remedy the situation? Et cetera. Obviously, we do that to hold each other accountable. But also, to develop best practices. Oh, wow, that, that little strategy worked, you know, it's something that, you know, we'll, we'll take note of and implement at a later time or, or repeat. So we go through that, the accountability piece, and then we start in our incidents or reviews.

Jennifer Donelan (12:57):

In order to best help listeners envision this process, give me a for example... Like if we got an example of a case that you wouldn't review, give me an example of a case you would review.

Paul Formolo (13:07):

Almost exclusively domestic violences will be reviewed. That's almost an automatic, and I can forward you our, like score sheet too, if that helps. But another example would be shootings between two opposing groups. You have group A going against Group B, and usually cliques Milwaukee doesn't really have that traditional gang problem. We have clique neighborhood issues. So if group A's shooting at Group B again, and that one will automatically get reviewed, because we, now we know group B's gonna come after group A. So that would be an opportunity to get our Office of Violence Prevention involved. And maybe they can send out their violence interrupters to the block or get some other services out these individuals to try to mediate or get a ceasefire in order.

Jennifer Donelan (13:48):

So that makes that all makes sense, right? Because now I can see where all these different levels... they have the potential to affect a particular situation.

Paul Formolo (13:57):

That's correct. We start reviewing our incidents. We're very respectful of people's times. We don't want this to turn into a review of the incident itself. Certainly we're going to highlight it, provide context, but we're not reading the police report. It's a very brief overview of the incident to provide context, kinda lay the groundwork down, then we start looking at where we can have impact, where are the exit ramps at for our victims, even our suspects? If children are present, what kind of resources can we get for them 'c ause we know children that are exposed to violence or witnessed violence, they have a higher potential of being part of that continuous cycle. So we start looking at the different exit ramps with our partners for services for everybody involved. We'll start looking at if there's NIBIN connections to this incident.

Jennifer Donelan (14:42):

So NIBIN is-

Paul Formolo (14:43):

National Integrated Ballistic Information Network. NIBIN.

Jennifer Donelan (14:47):

So it's basically tracing the bullets and the guns, right?

Paul Formolo (14:49):

That's correct. We're looking to see if the casings match each other. So it compares casings to casings and then casings to firearms.

Jennifer Donelan (14:57):

So you have federal partnership as well?

Paul Formolo (14:59):

Absolutely. We have the FBI, ATF and US Marshal Service there regularly... And our US Attorney's Office as well.

Jennifer Donelan (15:07):

That's got to aid in the prosecution of crimes.

Paul Formolo (15:10):

Yeah, and it's very beneficial having our US attorney office present, along with our state district attorney or county district attorney, in that when they start hearing the same names and groups over and over again, especially for those trigger pullers, who were just unable to get a good shooting case on for whatever reason, typically, it's lack of witness, victim cooperation. But when they hear that same person's name over and over again, week after week, and then when our investigators bring a case, and

that maybe a firearm or a narcotics offense, they'll know that this is serious, and we need to prosecute it to the fullest extent to make the community safer.

Jennifer Donelan (15:46):

So everything you've said up to this point already, for me personally, again, learning about it firsthand and for the first time, it already seems to attack two frustrations that you hear often about in law enforcement, which is the police are expected to be everything, right? They're expected to wear all these different hats. You have all those hats in the room, it sounds to me.

Paul Formolo (16:09):

That's correct. We do.

Jennifer Donelan (16:10):

You're able to do your job as police because you have those other resources that can fulfill the other roles, that's great. That's an answer I know a lot of people are looking for. The other aspect that this seems to tackle as well, that you often hear frustration in law enforcement about is that repeat offender.

Paul Formolo (16:27):

Yes.

Jennifer Donelan (16:27):

You've got eyeballs in the room who are witnessing firsthand the very things that you witness on a day to day basis, which is that frustrating, I locked this person up, this person committed this horrifying crime, but they're back out, now they've committed another horrifying crime. They're living it right alongside you through this process.

Paul Formolo (16:45):

That is 100% correct. And, you know, that is a challenge right now with our court system here in Milwaukee County. And I think it's still residual effects from the shutdown from COVID. And that we just didn't have the capacity to keep people in custody that needed to be in custody and court cases, just the backlog and being unable to meet those speedy trial demands, amongst other things. And so yes, we are challenged with trying to incapacitate those who are most violent within our community.

Jennifer Donelan (17:14):

Okay, so hindsight is 2020. How many cases do you know or generally how many cases that the public safety review team has processed since you started in 2018, roundabout?

Paul Formolo (17:25):

Oh, I would have to say hundreds [laughs].

Jennifer Donelan (17:27):

Hundred? Really?

Paul Formolo (17:28):

Yeah. So before 2020, our numbers were so low that we essentially could do every non-fatal shooting and every firearm related to homicide every week. But when the crime wave hit after the George Floyd incident, we were unable to have that capacity, 'cause we don't want a 3-hour meeting, for sure. We try to keep it to an hour, an hour and 15 minutes max. So that's when we developed the triaging and a weighted score process for which shootings are going to get reviewed.

Jennifer Donelan (17:54):

And do you have any statistical data that you can gauge success or impact?

Paul Formolo (18:00):

So when we first implemented in 2018, our homicides dropped 17% from 119 to 99, and then non-fatal shootings dropped 15%. But probably most importantly, were our non-fatal shooting clearance rate went up from like 20% to, I, I believe it was like the high 30s. And then-

Jennifer Donelan (18:19):

Wow.

Paul Formolo (18:19):

... in 2019, we finished off clearing 47% of our non-fatal shootings.

Jennifer Donelan (18:24):

So how is this whole thing being met with by the public? What's their reaction? Are they embracing this? Have you received negative feedback from them? Or are they welcoming of this review process? Because some could say that some degree, this is targeted enforcement.

Paul Formolo (18:40):

Right. It is, but it's not random. So it's back to the feedback piece of this from the public. Overwhelmingly, it's been positive. With this process that we have in place, because again, we have our social service partners attending as well. And they have their outreach within the community themselves. And they're kind of our voice and spokespeople, helping us communicate what we're trying to accomplish. But we're able to justify why we're going after this person, why we're going after this group, why we're in this neighborhood. And we use our partners to help message that.

(19:08):

Last summer, we did an operation, we titled it Operation Summer Guardian. And before we even went operational, we actually held like a town hall meeting with anybody. Our elected officials or activists, anybody that wanted to attend, and we basically explained to the community what we're going to do and why we're going to do it. And we use ShotSpotter data to show that these are the areas, these micro hotspots, these are the areas where most of the gunfire is taking place. And because of that, you're going to see an increased police presence in these areas. And we received all kinds of accolades for that transparency.

Jennifer Donelan (19:43):

And I think that really goes to speak to something that you're seeing more and more of when you get down to why some programs are more successful than others. And it's the piece where you have that transparency but in plain language, it's just being real with people.

Paul Formolo ([19:56](#)):

Correct.

Jennifer Donelan ([19:57](#)):

It doing and explaining why you're doing what you're doing. And I think people appreciate that.

Paul Formolo ([20:02](#)):

Yes, it's very important to explain it to the community. But you also have to message it properly to the officers, the actual individuals who are going to be boots on ground working in these neighborhoods.

Jennifer Donelan ([20:11](#)):

Yes.

Paul Formolo ([20:12](#)):

And we made it very clear to our officers, we are not gonna measure success by arrests, traffic stops, or tickets, we're gonna measure success by what occurs or doesn't occur in these areas while you're deployed in them.

Jennifer Donelan ([20:24](#)):

Go into a little more detail about that messaging that you're sending your officers, that it's not about how many arrests, it's not these quantitative stats, it seems to me more to be about the quality of their behavior and policing.

Paul Formolo ([20:35](#)):

That's it, we want them to be out there, be professional, be approachable. And obviously, if you see something, take the appropriate action. And that's the key, the appropriate action.

Jennifer Donelan ([20:44](#)):

And you've got the buy in from the officers?

Paul Formolo ([20:46](#)):

We did. I believe the officers enjoyed being out there. We have stories of our officers who are out there ready to respond to a ShotSpotter activation, but because of their presence, nothing's taking place, yet they're helping a kid put a chain on a bicycle, or they're helping a lady move a washer and dryer into her house. You know, those are the kinds of stories that we were getting. We weren't hearing the stories of our officers kicking in doors, taking people down at gunpoint, obviously, if we ever had to do that, we would. But it just didn't happen when we're deployed to those areas. And I'm very excited to see the results, we did submit all the data of this operation to our research partner, and hopefully they're gonna be able to get an evaluation and assessment of it.

Jennifer Donelan ([21:27](#)):

That's great, making sense of everything that you've been doing. That's great. So anyone following suit? Any other cities? I believe you allow other departments to come in and sit and observe this whole process. Have others taken on the task as well?

Paul Formolo (21:42):

Absolutely. I would love to say that this was strictly our idea. It wasn't, partly it was but we actually did a site visit with Oakland PD and saw what they're doing, took what they had and made it our own and consistently have shared it with other agencies and I know other departments are moving towards this. You know, I don't wanna speak for them, but I know it's growing. And it's becoming a good alternative to your traditional CompStat style policing.

Jennifer Donelan (22:07):

And, you know, it's the fact you've got everyone at the table, it's the fact you're respectful of their time, their area of expertise are being touched upon, so you can focus on your area of expertise. Officers get to be officers. It's pretty phenomenal. So if anyone wants to hear more about the program, or learn more about it, where can they find that? Who do they reach out to?

Paul Formolo (22:28):

Well, they can reach out to me, I'll provide my email address. It's pformo@milwaukee.gov. That's P-F-O-R-M-O-at-M-I-L-W-A-U-K-E-E-dot-G-O-V. You're welcome to come out here and visit us in person, we'll be glad to host or you can jump on virtually as well. We'll get you the login.

Jennifer Donelan (22:52):

Perfect. You know, I'm glad that we can play our little role and our small part in sharing the message about this program. I think everyone in law enforcement is looking for answers. They're looking for processes that work. And this sounds like one that's working, so I hope people reach out and touch base with you. We can't thank you enough for joining us here on The Beat.

Paul Formolo (23:12):
My pleasure. Anytime.

Jennifer Donelan (23:14):
All right, my friend. Thank you everyone for joining us here on The Beat.

The Beat Closing (23:18):

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