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Boston police launch program to search teenagers' bedrooms for guns, at parents' invitation

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BOSTON — Boston police will ask parents in high-crime areas to let detectives search their children's bedrooms for guns without warrants in a new anti-crime program.

Police believe parents are so worried their teenagers will be caught up in gun violence that they'll be willing to allow police into their homes. If the parents say no, the police will leave.

"They don't know what to do when faced with the problem of dealing with a teenage boy in possession of a firearm," police Commissioner Edward Davis said of parents. We're giving them an option in that case."

Davis announced the program Friday in a meeting with community leaders.

During the next two weeks, teams of three plainclothes officers assigned to schools will go to homes where they believe teens have guns and ask their parents or legal guardians for permission to search.

The program, called Safe Homes, has raised questions about civil liberties.

Thomas Nolan, a former Boston police lieutenant who teaches criminology at Boston University, called it "an end run around the Constitution."

"The police have restrictions on their authority and ability to conduct searches," he said. "The Constitution was written with a very specific intent, and that was to keep the law out of private homes unless there is a written document signed by a judge and based on probable cause. Here, you don't have that."

Some critics said people may be too intimidated to say no to police.

"People might not understand the implications of weapons being tested or any contraband being found," said Amy Reichbach, a racial justice advocate at the American Civil Liberties Union.

The program is modeled after one that began in 1994 in St. Louis and ended in 1999, partly because funding ran out. Boston police said that in the first year of the St. Louis program, police were allowed into 98 percent of homes contacted and that guns were seized in half of them.

Davis said officers won't conduct such searches in the homes of teenagers suspected in shootings or homicides whom investigators are trying to prosecute. If officers find drugs during a warrantless search, it will be up to them whether to make an arrest. Modest amounts of drugs like marijuana will simply be confiscated, officials said.

The Rev. Jeffrey Brown, co-founder of the anti-crime Boston TenPoint Coalition, backed the initiative.

"What I like about this program is it really is a tool to empower the parent," he said. "It's a way in which they can get a hold of the household and say, 'I don't want that in my house.'"

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