



● Importance of Police-Community Relationships and Resources for Further Reading

Why Police-Community Relationships Are Important

Strong relationships of mutual trust between police agencies and the communities they serve are critical to maintaining public safety and effective policing. Police officials rely on the cooperation of community members to provide information about crime in their neighborhoods, and to work with the police to devise solutions to crime and disorder problems. Similarly community members' willingness to trust the police depends on whether they believe that police actions reflect community values and incorporate the principles of procedural justice and legitimacy.

In the wake of recent incidents involving police use of force and other issues, the legitimacy of the police has been questioned in many communities. Many cities in the United States experienced large-scale demonstrations and protest marches in 2014 and 2015, and in some cases, there have been riots over perceptions of police misconduct and excessive use of force. It is imperative that police agencies make improving relationships with their local communities a top priority.

On July 10, 2015, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) hosted a national meeting of police and community leaders, from around the nation, for a day-long discussion of strategies for building trust between the police and community. These community leaders offered guidance about several ways in which police can demonstrate an understanding of issues so as to build trust.

Following are some key issues and recommendations that were identified during the meeting, along with other promising practices, that can be used to help police departments and their communities to develop collaborative strategies for moving forward.

Recommendations for Police-Community Relationship Building

1. Acknowledge and discuss with your communities the challenges you are facing.

Controversial uses of force and other incidents can damage relationships between police and their communities. In some cases, a perceived egregious act of misconduct by a single officer in one city not only damages police-community relationships locally; it can gain nationwide attention and reduce trust of the police generally.

Police should acknowledge the history of racial minorities and others who have faced injustice at the hands of the police. And police should never discount the negative experiences of individuals with the police. African-Americans in particular have a history of being marginalized and mistreated by the police, leading to a lack of trust and resentment. This history is reflected in many people's feelings about the police.¹ For instance, there are many people alive today who have their own memories of the Jim Crow era, when a number of police departments were agents of enforcement of laws that institutionalized racial discrimination. Civil rights leaders at the PERF meeting in 2015 said that while it is true that many police officers were not even born then and thus cannot be held responsible for enforcing Jim Crow laws, all police officers should be aware of this history and should be responsible *to* it, meaning that police must understand that this history is legitimately a part of some people's feelings about the police.

And looking at more recent history, police must understand that the mistrust of police by some community members is also rooted in issues such as racial disparities resulting from laws that require sharply greater penalties for crack cocaine violations as opposed to powder cocaine.

Finally, a variety of current-day police strategies and tactics have contributed to mistrust of police in minority communities, such as the inappropriate use of "stop and frisk" policies in some departments. These tactics raise issues of racial bias that permeate the controversies about police use of force.

Police should consider establishing "duty to intervene" policies and other strategies for ensuring that if one officer engages in misconduct, other officers will step and stop it. Ideally, such interventions will occur immediately, in view of community members, the community leaders said, because people may not trust police agencies' internal affairs or complaint investigation systems, but they will trust their own eyes when they see – either in person, or on a YouTube video – officers not hesitating to stop wrongdoing by a fellow officer.

2. Be transparent and accountable.

Transparency is essential to positive police-community relationships. When a critical incident occurs, agencies should try to release as much information about it as possible, as soon as possible, so the community will not feel that information is being purposefully withheld from them. At the same time, it is also important to stress that the first information to emerge following a critical incident is preliminary and may change as more information becomes available. Police leaders should let the news media and the public know that early information may not be correct, and should correct any misinformation quickly.

On a day-to-day level, police departments should post information on their websites detailing policies on use of force, community member complaints, and other issues. This information should be easily accessible to the community. The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing recommended that "to embrace a culture of transparency, law enforcement agencies should make all department policies available for public review and regularly post on the department's website information about stops, summonses, arrests, reported crime, and other law enforcement data, aggregated by demographics."²

Agencies may also consider seeking accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies or similar agencies as a method of demonstrating their commitment to excellence in law enforcement. Agencies can also demonstrate transparency and accountability by

1. Mentel, Zoe. (2012). *Racial Reconciliation, Truth-Telling, and Police Legitimacy*. U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

2. *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Action Item 1.3.1, Page 13.

http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf

adopting mechanisms for external oversight, such as independent auditors or external review boards for internal affairs investigations.

The Department of Justice Civil Rights Division's past investigations of local police departments also provide a wealth of information about best practices to ensure constitutional policing. Numerous documents from these investigations are available on the Civil Rights Division's website.³ The consent decrees, case summaries, findings letters, and other documents detail reforms in policies, training, and practices in areas including police use of force, Early Intervention Systems to detect potential problems with officers' behavior, management and supervision of officers, bias in policing, police interactions with persons with mental illness, and other areas that most often result in DOJ investigations.⁴

3. Take steps to reduce bias and improve cultural competency.

Many civil rights leaders and police executives also recommend that officers at all levels receive training on diversity, implicit bias, and cultural competency. Many cities and towns have communities with a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and cultures, and it is important for officers to be able to communicate effectively with, and understand the cultural norms of, these different groups.

This need was also underscored by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which recommended that police agencies provide recruit training and in-service training on implicit bias and cultural responsiveness.⁵ Research shows that individuals who are made aware of their implicit biases are motivated to implement unbiased behaviors.⁶

4. Maintain focus on the importance of collaboration, and be visible in the community.

It is important for the police to be visible in their communities and know their residents. Many people do not interact with the police outside of enforcement contexts. This can result in people developing negative associations with the police – for example, if the only contact they have ever had with police consisted of receiving a traffic citation or calling the police to report being the victim of a crime. Finding opportunities to interact with community members in a non-enforcement context helps to reduce bias on the part of community members and police officers. Getting to know community residents helps both groups to break down personal barriers and overcome stereotypes, and allows officers to learn which residents of a neighborhood are law-abiding and which ones are not. Police executives often report that law-abiding residents of high-crime neighborhoods resent it when police seem suspicious of everyone in the neighborhood, and, for example, make pedestrian stops of young men who are on their way to work or to school.

Personal interactions between police officers and community members build mutual trust, which is essential to addressing neighborhood problems and reducing crime. Programs and initiatives to foster these interactions include:

3. See the Civil Rights Division website, section on "Cases and Matters, Special Litigation Section, Law Enforcement Agencies." <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/spl/findsettle.php>

4. In 2012, PERF conducted a comprehensive review of these DOJ investigations of local police departments and hosted a meeting of police executives, civil rights leaders, and other local and federal officials from around the nation to discuss the findings. For more information, see Police Executive Research Forum. *Civil Rights Investigations of Local Police: Lessons Learned*. 2013. http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Critical_Issues_Series/civil_rights_investigations_of_local_police_-_lessons_learned_2013.pdf

5. *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015. http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf Recommendation 5.9, page 58.

6. Kristin A. Lane, Jerry Kang, and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "Implicit Social Cognition and Law," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3 (December 2007); and Irene V. Blair, "The Malleability of Automatic Stereotypes and Prejudice," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6, no. 3 (2002): 242–261.

- Adult and youth police academies,
- Sports teams or “Police Athletic Leagues,”
- Ride-alongs with officers,
- Police involvement in local school activities, and
- Police participation in (or police-led) community events.⁷

Police officials should see themselves as a part of the community they serve, and local government officials, police leaders, and community members should encourage the active involvement of officers as participants to help maintain the peace. For example, police officials may be invited to participate in peace marches, to attend local sporting events, or to attend neighborhood barbecues or outdoor community “movie nights” for kids.

5. Promote internal diversity and ensure professional growth opportunities.

Police agencies need to present policing as a profession. Departments should work to recruit people who want to become officers based on a realistic understanding that the large majority of police officers’ time is spent addressing community requests and that actual “law enforcement” is a much smaller percentage of the time. Police agencies also should step up efforts in recruiting and promotional processes to increase overall diversity in their departments by race and many other demographics. Agencies should provide regular opportunities for career growth and professional development training. The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing calls for the federal government as well as state and local agencies to “incentivize” higher education for police officers through student loan programs.⁸

Internal processes of a department regarding recruiting, promotions, and other matters should be transparent and fair. When an agency creates an environment that promotes internal fairness and respect, officers are more likely to demonstrate these qualities in their daily interactions with the community.⁹

Resources for Further Reading:

1. President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015. “Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing.” *Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Washington D.C.* http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf
2. “Biased-Based Policing” (collection of documents). *Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Washington D.C.* <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=2274>
3. Gove, Tracey G. “Implicit Bias and Law Enforcement,” *The Police Chief*. October 2011: (78)44–56. http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=2499&issue_id=102011-37
4. Procedural Justice for Law Enforcement Agencies: Organizational Change through the Integration of Procedural Justice Core Principles into Decision Making and Policies. 2012. *University of Illinois Center for Public Safety and Justice*.

7. Many of these activities were recommended by the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

8. *Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015. http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf. Recommendation 5.11, page 59.

9. *Ibid.*, see esp. Recommendation 1.1., pp. 11–12.

5. Shusta, Robert M. et al. 2005. *Multicultural Law Enforcement: Strategies for Peacekeeping in a Diverse Society*.
6. Police Executive Research Forum, 2013. "Civil Rights Investigations of Local Police: Lessons Learned." *Office of Community Oriented Policing, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C.*
http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Critical_Issues_Series/civil_rights_investigations_of_local_police_-_lessons_learned_2013.pdf
7. Mentel, Zoe. (2012). Racial Reconciliation, Truth-Telling, and Police Legitimacy. U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services: <http://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-p241-pub.pdf>
8. Resource library. Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, Department of Criminology, Law, and Society, George Mason University: <http://cebcp.org/evidence-based-policing/what-works-in-policing/resource-library/>
9. Walker, Samuel, and Carol Archbold. *The New World of Police Accountability*. Second edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014. (See additional work by Samuel Walker at <http://www.samuelwalker.net>.)
10. Police Executive Research Forum, 2007. "'Good to Great' Policing: Application of Business Management Principles in the Public Sector." *Office of Community Oriented Policing, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C.*
http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Leadership/good_to_great_policing_-_application_of_business_management_principles_in_the_public_sector_2007.pdf