

Beyond Confrontation:
Community-Centered
Policing Tools

PolicyLink



Engaging Communities as Partners: Strategies for Problem Solving

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Foreword

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot multiple times and killed by Darren Wilson, a White police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. This tragic act provoked grief and outrage in Ferguson and across the country. We mourned the loss of an innocent young man, taken before his time, and recognized that his killing was the latest in a long and rapidly growing succession of cases involving police use of lethal force against unarmed people of color.

The disproportionate, militarized police response to subsequent community protests in Ferguson—including the use of tear gas and snipers, curfews enforced by armored trucks and tactical units, and the unwarranted arrest of multiple journalists—further incensed the country and, in conjunction with Michael Brown’s killing, raised an urgent question:

What must change so that **not one more** person of color is unjustifiably and indefensibly killed by the police?

While there are no definitive figures on how many Americans are shot by police every year, existing data point to grave differences by race. In 2014 alone, [police were responsible for the deaths of 302 Black people](#) across the country. From 2010 – 2012, Black men were 21 times more likely than their White peers to be killed by police.¹ Similar racial disparities hold true among those injured by police.²

From 2010–2012, Black men were 21 times more likely than White men to be killed by police.

Local law enforcement units too often treat low-income neighborhoods populated by people of color—communities where people strive to live, learn, work, play, and pray in peace and harmony—as if they are enemy territory. Youth of color who should be growing up in supportive, affirming environments are instead presumed to be criminals and relentlessly subjected to aggressive police tactics that result in unnecessary fear, arrests, injuries, and deaths. This approach prevents police from being seen as trusted community partners, undermining neighborhood safety when coordinated efforts are most needed.

The militarization of police departments further erodes the trust that should exist between residents and the police who serve them. The proliferation of machine guns, armored vehicles and aircraft, and camouflage in local law enforcement units does not help police-community relations, the future of our cities, or our country.

To move forward, the country must also acknowledge and counter the effects of systemic racial bias, which impairs the perceptions, judgment, and behavior of too many of our law enforcement personnel and obstructs the ability of our police departments and criminal justice institutions to protect and serve all communities in a fair and just manner.

In the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death, PolicyLink, the Center for Global Policy Solutions, and over 1,400 social justice leaders, congressional members, faith leaders, artists, and activists signed [an open letter to President Obama](#), urging federal action through the Justice Department to improve police-community relations through seven principles.

The Justice Department recently launched the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, which aims to combat distrust and hostility between law enforcement and the communities they serve.

Soon after the letter was issued, the Justice Department launched the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice. Funded with a three-year, \$4.75 million federal grant, the initiative invests in training, evidence-based strategies, policy development, and research to combat distrust and hostility between law enforcement and the communities they serve. The initiative

brings together a consortium of national law enforcement experts, including the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Yale Law School, the Center for Policing Equity at UCLA, and the Urban Institute.³

Several weeks later, the Department of Justice completed its [investigation of the Ferguson Police Department](#), uncovering deep-seated injustice and racism in nearly every facet of the department's practices. Soon after the report's release, a Ferguson municipal judge and several Ferguson police officers—including Police Chief Thomas Jackson—resigned or were fired. At the same time, the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing released a robust [report](#), complete with thoughtful and comprehensive recommendations and action steps to help overhaul policing practices in a way that benefits communities.

While these represent promising steps at the federal level to advance “community-centered policing,” local efforts and leadership are also needed. The seven principles in the open letter to President Obama can guide actions by community leaders to help improve police-community relations and institute community-centered policing at the local level. They can help build mutual trust and respect, increase safety in communities, and minimize senseless killings and excessive use of force by police:

- 1. Ensure Transparency and Accountability:** Police departments are funded by the public and should be accountable to the public. Therefore, police departments should not investigate themselves. Departments should establish enforceable, impartial accountability measures in instances where police brutality, racial profiling, and/or improper use of force are in question. This includes establishing effective and independent review boards broadly representative of the community, not just police interests. The actions, investigations, and publication of all relevant information, evidence, and policy recommendations of departments and review boards should be transparent and enforceable. Departments should also ensure that data and summary information are properly collected and made publicly available on particular incidents, progress, and trends that relate to suspected police brutality and racial profiling over the years for the department.
- 2. Invest in Training:** Racial bias is real. Whether implicit or explicit, it influences perceptions and behaviors and can be deadly. Law enforcement personnel should be required to undergo racial bias training in addition to building skills that exemplify problem-solving strategies, conflict mediation techniques, and de-escalation tactics. Officers should become adept at being responsive to community needs and voices, and achieving consistency and continuity in engaging community while enforcing the law.
- 3. Ensure Diversity:** Police department personnel should be representative of the communities they protect and serve. Therefore, police departments should adopt personnel practices that result in the hiring and retention of diverse law enforcement professionals who are culturally sensitive, speak the communities' languages, and are residents of their patrolled communities. Departments should implement and monitor diversity hiring and retention guidelines to further community trust and partnerships.
- 4. Proactively Engage Communities:** Too often, law enforcement personnel hold stereotypes about Black and brown youth and vice versa. Lack of familiarity breeds lack of understanding and increases opportunities for conflict. Police departments should work to deconstruct stereotypes and bias by identifying regular opportunities for constructive and quality engagement with youth and others living in the communities

they serve. Departments should therefore partner with our communities in solving and preventing problems *before* they occur.

5. Reject Militarization: Police should not become an occupying force in our neighborhoods. Emergencies and terrorism are real concerns for our communities, but departments should not rely on military equipment and tactics to police everyday problems or peaceful protests. Departments and communities should reject the transfer of military equipment into local police departments.

6. Examine and Implement Good Models: It is possible to develop police departments that respect, serve, and protect all people in our communities regardless of age, race, physical and mental ability, gender, or class. Every department should partner with other local, state, and federal entities to quickly identify and establish new policies and practices to improve policing in communities.

7. Implement Technology and Tools for Oversight: Departments should implement technology that helps to investigate and hold officers accountable for misconduct, such as profiling due to a person's race, class, religion, gender, physical or mental ability, or sexual orientation. The technology should only be used when legitimately apprehending suspects with probable cause, and all information gathered by the use of technology should be made publicly accessible immediately.

In 2001, PolicyLink and Advancement Project released [Community-Centered Policing: A Force for Change](#), a report intended to help advocates, policymakers, and police officials understand models addressing the myriad challenges facing police departments, police-community relations, and the advancement of community-centered policing practices. With the same goal, PolicyLink and Advancement Project have come together once more to lift up solutions, this time with a series of issue briefs that will update some of the examples and best practices originally presented and explore critical new issues in the following areas:

- Limiting Police Use of Force
- Engaging Communities as Partners
- Demilitarizing Local Police Departments
- Sustaining and Institutionalizing Best Practices and Strategies

The second brief, presented below, explores strategies for engaging communities as partners in problem solving. We hope these new and updated briefs will be tools for community leaders to use in conversations with local police forces and policymakers that can shape new policies to help communities—including low-income communities and communities of color—become healthier, more vibrant, and safer for all to participate and prosper.



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Introduction

In the weeks since PolicyLink and Advancement Project released the first brief in the *Beyond Confrontation: Community-Centered Policing Tools* series, [Limiting Police Use of Force](#), the nation has been shaken by the grand jury decisions in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York, not to indict the officers responsible for the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Additional examples of police using lethal force against unarmed people of color—including the heart-breaking shooting and death of 12-year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio—have amplified the anguish and outrage.

These incidents have also aligned and intensified the resolve of people across the country demanding justice and a fundamental paradigm shift in how police interact with communities of color. An emerging group of inspiring community leaders—primarily young, Black organizers in Ferguson and nationwide—have demonstrated extraordinary passion, determination, and creativity in coordinating continuous local actions, often utilizing both innovative and tried-and-true civil disobedience tactics.

These efforts are contributing to an emerging movement led by young people of color—not seen since the civil rights era—that is vital to any hope of dismantling institutional racism, ending police violence, and deeply transforming relationships between police and communities. Yet more is needed—even if every demand to improve policing policies and practices is met, communities and police officers will still have to build trust, respect, and a spirit of cooperation to truly begin to change the way police and communities interact.

Developing meaningful police-community partnerships may seem implausible, especially in the current climate of raw pain and impassioned protest. But there are examples from across the country where communities and police have begun demonstrating how to collaborate and build working relationships that increase safety, decrease arrests and police violence, and improve the well-being of community members. *Engaging Communities as Partners*, the second brief in our series, lifts up many of these promising practices.

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Overview of Community-Police Collaboration

Building trusting relationships is the key to successful community-centered policing.⁴ Police and residents who trust each other will be more likely to collaborate on solutions to deep-seated safety concerns. Police who understand communities can deploy appropriate resources at critical times, avoid dynamics that can lead to violence, and find community partners to improve safety in a sustainable way. To achieve community-centered policing, residents and police must partner to prevent crime and to integrate police officers into the fabric of the community.

To be sure, building police-community trust can be difficult and frustrating. In many crime-impacted, low-income neighborhoods, fear and suspicion of police can create barriers to stable, trusting partnerships. The over-policing of communities through aggressive traffic, drug, and petty offense enforcement does not help foster effective community-police collaboration.⁵ A historical legacy of racism—from slave patrols to police violence in the civil rights era to more recent shootings—also feeds a deep distrust for law enforcement in many communities of color.

The nation saw many of these dynamics play out in Ferguson, Missouri, when an unarmed young Black man was killed in an officer-involved shooting. Beyond the tragedy of Michael Brown's young life being lost—a story that is repeated too often in communities throughout the country—the subsequent response by the Ferguson Police Department and area law enforcement included overly aggressive tactics and use of military-grade weapons against community members. These actions reinforced the sentiment that law enforcement stood in opposition to the community, instead of protecting and serving them.

Some law enforcement leaders have criticized how law enforcement conducted itself in Ferguson. And some communities have worked hard over the long-term to forge meaningful relationships between law enforcement and community stakeholders built on mutual accountability, transparency, and continued commitment to dialogue, even in the wake of tragic incidents. In order for these transformative advances to take root as the new norm for policing in communities throughout the country, community advocates and law enforcement must see a future beyond Ferguson and commit to developing ways of working together.

Establishing trust requires sustained work on many fronts to build relationships before crises occur. This brief, the second in the *Beyond Confrontation* series, highlights the following promising practices in community-police engagement:

- Training for effective community-police collaboration.
- Promoting transparency in police practices and procedures.
- Creative engagement with immigrant communities.
- Police-community partnerships for violence prevention.

It is important to note that while these practices can significantly improve the relationships between police and community leaders and residents, senior police executives and command staffs must also commit to making them a high priority for police agencies and for police staff at all levels.

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Promising Practices to Increase Community-Police Collaboration

Training Practices

Training—for both academy recruits and in-service officers—can institutionalize policing that emphasizes trust and transparency with the community. Training can also provide proven techniques and skills to improve interactions and avoid unnecessary arrests and confrontations.

Improving Police Interactions with Youth

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 30 percent of all incidents where police used force involved young people ages 16 to 19, an age group representing just 7.6 percent of the population.⁶ Training based on the science of adolescent brain development can teach police how to interact more effectively with youth and help avoid escalation into conflict and violence.

[Strategies for Youth](#), a Massachusetts-based nonprofit advocacy and police training organization, is helping police departments across the country improve their interactions with youth.⁷ Strategies for Youth works closely with departmental leadership to change policy and practice and offers a hands-on training, [Policing the Teen Brain](#), where police officers learn skills and techniques to promote more constructive and collaborative interactions.

In 2004, Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority officers who were recruited from Boston's surrounding suburbs struggled to successfully engage with youth from the region's urban areas. These poor interactions heightened the anxiety of both youth and officers, and led to unnecessary arrests. Strategies for Youth trained the officers on best practices for engaging with youth in the field, including an overview of how neurological changes occurring in teens' brains account for many of their "hard-to-police" behaviors. Officers learned how to assert authority using alternative techniques, increase compliance from teens, and de-escalate volatile situations. Officers also learned to recognize prevalent mental health issues among teens—including the effects of trauma—and how to act accordingly.⁸

Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) also developed a special policing unit, known as [StopWatch](#), to develop relationships with youth who used transit and to limit the use of stations as places to congregate. Youth-serving stakeholders collectively attend different StopWatch locations every week to get to know youth and offer services, if needed. The transit authority selects stations for Stopwatch every week, based on frequency of problems, rumors of fights, and passenger complaints. Participating partners include assistant principals, youth workers, probation officers, Boston police officers, and private youth-serving organizations. Since implementing StopWatch, MBTA's rate of youth arrests has decreased sharply.⁹

The Milwaukee Police Department has also improved its interactions with youth by overhauling its School Resource Officer and School Patrol Officer programs. Officers who wish to work at schools are now required to undergo a screening and selection process that involves interviews

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with community partners who work with youth, including the Boys and Girls Club, the Boy Scouts, and schools. In addition, these officers participate in the Policing the Teen Brain training to increase their empathy, understanding, and hands-on skills. As a result, incidents in schools where police used force decreased from 55 in 2013 to 5 so far in 2014.¹⁰

Training Gang Intervention Workers and Police

Advancement Project's [Urban Peace Academy](#) trains community gang intervention workers and police departments to work together for community safety in Los Angeles. The six-day training for gang intervention workers equips participants with the necessary skills to work toward violence reduction. Concrete skills in mediation, conflict resolution, rumor control, and strategic communications help the workers to deal effectively with gang members, victims, families, police, and the community. The curriculum also focuses on ways that gang intervention workers must continue to work on their personal transformation from former gang member to peace maker by upholding standards of practice and conduct established by the Urban Peace Academy.

Part of the training includes the participation of officers from the Los Angeles Police Department and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Gang intervention workers-in-training have the opportunity to dialogue with the police and learn about how they work. Police also gain insight into how former gang members have turned their lives around and see their willingness to interrupt the cycle of violence and retaliation.

Once workers are certified, they are assigned to "hot zones" and are notified through the Real Time Analysis and Critical Response Division of the Los Angeles Police Department when a major incident has occurred. They are expected to respond to an incident occurring in their assigned zone, day or night. Gang intervention workers play a key role in buying time and helping to restore calm in the neighborhood. They also engage their networks across neighborhoods and gang territories to reduce tension and avoid retaliation, helping to stop a spiraling cycle of violence that could stem from one incident.

The Urban Peace Academy also trains police departments in the greater Los Angeles area on how community-based gang intervention works. The eight-hour training clarifies the differing roles and responsibilities of police officers and intervention practitioners. Police find out how community intervention practitioners can serve as allies in reducing violence through their contacts among gangs and community residents. Police also learn that practitioners do not involve themselves or interfere in law enforcement investigations. Officers are challenged to change their mindset—"once a gang member, always a gang member"—and see the potential for transformation in people and in relationships.

Top leadership in the Los Angeles Police Department is committed to this community-based approach, but institutional change in the department is stronger in some command areas than in others. One goal for the Urban Peace Academy is to integrate its training into police academy training curricula in order to broaden its reach. Another is to train more Latino gang intervention workers and expand its work so that more Latino neighborhoods fully embrace community-based gang intervention.

Promoting Transparency in Police Practices and Procedures

When police are open, respectful, and forthcoming about the reason for a particular interaction, and can explain what is happening and the procedures they follow, community members are less likely to feel fear and distrust. They are more likely to perceive that their voice is heard and the process is fair.¹¹ In community-centered policing, police authority is derived not only from the law but also from its legitimacy in the eyes of the community. Community members can view police as legitimate when they see officers carry out their duties lawfully, fairly, and in accordance with the community's best interests.¹²

Building a sense of legitimacy and procedural justice have emerged as promising strategies for police departments to increase trust and minimize confrontation. Whether police are viewed as legitimate depends on public trust and confidence, the willingness of residents to defer to police authority, and the belief that police actions are justified and appropriate. Procedural justice can help achieve legitimacy by giving residents a chance to be heard, being open and transparent about police procedure, treating residents with dignity and respect, and demonstrating sensitivity to residents' needs and concerns.¹³ A number of departments, including Oakland, California, and Chicago, Illinois, are implementing training in these principles. Please see the section on [Practices to Minimize Use of Force](#) from *Limiting Police Use of Force* for a full description of procedural justice and legitimacy training.

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Police departments can also strengthen transparency and build trust by providing comprehensive information to the community in a timely manner, especially in the event of an officer-involved shooting. According to Chicago Superintendent of Police Garry McCarthy, the delay in the Ferguson Police Department's communication about the Michael Brown shooting left many police executives "aghast."¹⁴ This communication vacuum fuels confusion, resentment, and misinformation in the community. McCarthy emphasized the need to cultivate relationships with key community leaders before a crisis and communicate with them without delay when an incident occurs.

To facilitate police-community communication in Chicago, McCarthy established a phone tree communication system for each district after his hiring in 2011. District commanders are responsible for creating a first-tier list of community members who should be contacted immediately after a controversial incident, day or night. A second tier outlines whom to reach out to early the next day. In addition, the commander must hold a press event about the incident no later than the following day. The commander must also convene a meeting to share information with key community members within 24 hours of any incident.

Creative Engagement with Immigrant Communities

Working collaboratively with immigrant communities presents a particular challenge for police departments. Newcomers to the United States are settling beyond traditional gateway cities like New York and Los Angeles and increasingly becoming part of the social and economic fabric of suburbs, small towns, and rural areas.¹⁵

Language barriers may prevent immigrants and the police from understanding each other. Lack of basic cultural knowledge also hinders engagement: immigrants may lack clarity on how to react to police during routine situations such as traffic stops, for example, while police may be ignorant about communication traditions and norms among immigrants. Finally, immigrants and refugees

may avoid reporting crime because they fear the police, based on experiences in their home countries, or because of fear of deportation.¹⁶ According to one study, more than four in 10 Latinos say that police involvement in enforcing immigration laws prevent them from volunteering information about crimes, because they fear getting caught in the web of immigration enforcement.¹⁷

Immigrants and refugees may avoid reporting crime because they fear the police, based on experiences in their home countries, or because of fear of deportation.

A 2014 California law, the Trust Act, prevents state and local law enforcement agencies from detaining undocumented residents solely because of their immigration status. Under the law, only those convicted of a serious or violent felony can be subject to deportation hold requests by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This state law parallels ordinances and resolutions in counties across the country that limit the involvement of local police in enforcing federal immigration law.¹⁸

To avoid unnecessary hardship on undocumented immigrants, Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck banned the practice of impounding cars driven by drivers without a license. Undocumented immigrants comprised the majority of drivers whose cars were impounded for this infraction because they had been prohibited from obtaining licenses.¹⁹ Under the police directive, undocumented drivers without prior convictions can summon another person with a license to drive the car away.

Police departments must explore and implement new approaches to effectively engage communities with immigrants. The knowledge and insight that come from trust-based relationships will better enable officers to distinguish between innocent cultural behaviors and behaviors that could indicate criminal activity.²⁰

Increasing Language and Cultural Competency

Language training is an important strategy for police departments to improve communication with growing immigrant communities. The Oklahoma City Police Department has made language training for officers a major part of its overall training effort. New recruits in the academy receive 70 hours of Spanish instruction, almost twice what they previously received.²¹ The Lexington, Kentucky, Division of Police partnered with a local university to develop a U.S.-based Spanish language curriculum and collaborated with two Mexican law enforcement agencies to establish a subsequent five-week Spanish immersion program in Mexico where Lexington officers are hosted by Mexican police counterparts. When they return to Lexington, officers have both improved their language skills and increased their understanding of Mexican immigrants' expectations about interactions with law enforcement.²²

Creative Problem Solving

In Florida, the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office addressed public safety and crime prevention needs in both Latino and Caribbean immigrant communities. One issue involved men in the Mayan-Guatemalan community being routinely targeted for robbery, and then often failing to report the crime or cooperate with investigators. To better understand the problem, the Sheriff's Office hired a multilingual civilian community liaison to discuss the issue with community members in both Spanish and Kanjobel, an indigenous language spoken by many in the local population. The liaison discovered that community members carried large amounts of cash because they believed they could not establish bank accounts without a U.S. government-issued ID. The Sheriff's Office reached out to local banks and the Guatemalan Consulate to assist immigrants

in presenting appropriate identification to establish bank accounts. The liaison also coordinated with the robbery unit to explain to robbery victims the benefits of cooperating with investigators.

The Sheriff's office undertook a different strategy with the Haitian immigrant community after previous outreach efforts failed. When the 2010 earthquake devastated much of Haiti, the Sheriff's Office joined the local Haitian community in providing relief. A commander, sergeant, and two Haitian-American deputies used personal funds and obtained a small grant from the Palm Beach County Police Benevolent Association to travel to Haiti. These representatives learned firsthand about the need for medical supplies and resources for the Haitian National Police, and partnered with the American Jewish Committee upon their return to fund-raise for supplies. They raised \$175,000 and filled two shipping containers with an operating table, two police cars, wheelchairs, and other supplies. The visible concern for the community demonstrated by this unusual trip and subsequent follow-through changed the perception of law enforcement. The time in Haiti also helped the Sheriff's office understand and adopt more culturally appropriate practices in how deputies interact with the community.²³

Recognizing that—like other communities—immigrant communities are not one-dimensional and generally cannot be represented by a single stakeholder or spokesperson, police departments are diversifying outreach, connecting with business and religious leaders, and making conscious efforts to get to know members of the community who can deepen cultural understanding and help defuse crisis situations when they arise.²⁴ Effective police work includes consulting community members who may not be in leadership roles, but nonetheless have important information to share and can help verify genuine community support for police initiatives.²⁵

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Police-Community Partnerships for Violence Prevention

Developing effective police-community partnerships is an art and represents a departure from familiar ways of operating for both the police and residents. It requires a policing perspective that goes beyond the standard law enforcement focus and a willingness to engage in nuts and bolts neighborhood problem solving.²⁶ Effective partnerships also involve the willingness of community members to engage in constructive dialogue with the police. Through intentional efforts to build trust and collaborate, police and community members can act as catalysts and facilitators of activities to strengthen the community and increase safety. The violence prevention partnerships below are an example of this practice.

Through intentional efforts to build trust and collaborate, police and community members can act as catalysts and facilitators of activities to strengthen the community and increase safety.

Operation Ceasefire

The [Operation Ceasefire](#) model was pioneered in Boston in 1996. This strategy brings together law enforcement, social service providers, and community members in an ongoing partnership to collaborate with at-risk youth and gang offenders:

Together the partnership delivers a unified antiviolence message, explains that violence will bring law enforcement attention to entire groups, offers services and alternatives to group members, and articulates community norms against violence....The strategy requires all three [sectors] to collaborate closely and focus their efforts on the very small group of actors most likely to be perpetrators or victims of violence.²⁷

With adequate resources and active involvement from the community, police, and service providers, the Operation Ceasefire model has shown great promise at effectively reducing violence. Oakland, California, launched [a revamped Operation Ceasefire program](#) in October 2012. By the end of 2013, homicides had decreased by 30 percent and shootings by 15 percent, compared to the previous year.²⁸

Lifelines to Healing / Baton Rouge Area Violence Elimination Project

The [Lifelines to Healing](#) Campaign, created by the [PICO National Network](#), helps communities around the country implement the Ceasefire model. The Lifelines affiliate in Baton Rouge—the Baton Rouge Area Violence Elimination Project (BRAVE)—uses a data-driven approach to identify the small number of chronic offenders responsible for most of the crime and violence in particular areas of the city. BRAVE then holds “call-ins” or meetings between law enforcement, community leaders, and violent offenders. Offenders are given three choices: stop participating in violent activity and accept services provided by the program, stop participating in violent activity and refuse services provided by the program, or continue to participate in illegal activity and suffer the legal consequences.²⁹

Local law enforcement has demonstrated significant commitment to this effort. Baton Rouge Police Chief Carl Dabadie characterized BRAVE as “changing the culture of police work” through collaboration with the community.³⁰ In 2014, representatives from the Sheriff’s Office, the Mayor-President’s Office, and the District Attorney’s Office attended a two-day seminar led by David Kennedy, the architect of Operation Ceasefire. Since the training, law enforcement representatives have added a new component to BRAVE—small teams of officers visit the homes of young people identified as potential perpetrators or victims of crime. Similar to the group call-ins, these targeted interventions provide an opportunity to engage with at-risk youth one-on-one to explain the various counseling or faith-based services available to help them get their lives on track.³¹

Community Safety Partnership in Watts

Advancement Project is pioneering an innovative police-community violence prevention partnership in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Residents of Watts experience high levels of gang activity—multigenerational gangs operate openly in its housing developments. In 2010 alone, residents reported 1,604 property crimes, 288 gang crimes, and over 800 violent crimes in housing developments.

Advancement Project was commissioned by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles to assess and recommend violence reduction solutions. Findings indicated a need for large-scale, systemic changes to promote community safety, which led to the 2011 creation of the [Community Safety Partnership](#)—an agreement between the Los Angeles Police Department and the Housing Authority, with Advancement Project as a convener and resource provider.

As part of the Partnership, the Los Angeles Police Department assigned 45 officers to serve for five years at three housing projects in Watts and at an additional housing project in East Los Angeles. These long-term assignments allowed officers to learn about and participate in the life of the

community. The officers must provide safe passages for students going to and from school, participate in community safety initiatives, and support positive youth outcomes. In addition, officers are directed to be visible on foot and bike patrol and often show up to community events such as basketball tournaments and food drives. The officers assigned to these projects were selected from 400 applicants and began their new assignment with an increase in pay and a promotion, an explicit signal that the Los Angeles Police Department prioritized this work.

Advancement Project's Urban Peace Academy trained the officers on relationship-based policing for 40 hours prior to deployment. During this training, the officers interacted with more than 25 community stakeholders—including residents, service providers, school leaders, and gang interventionists—who would become their partners in implementing violence reduction strategies to increase safety.

In addition to daily crime and public safety concerns, the Community Safety Partnership is addressing longstanding issues such as public sector inattention, evolving community dynamics due to shifting racial demographics, and strained community relationships with law enforcement in Watts. Formal and informal contact with the police enables community members to play a larger role in setting local police priorities and developing creative solutions to community problems.

Expanded, consistent, and trusted police presence has helped to identify local problems, strengthen relationships, and assist in creating a sense among residents that police officers are problem solvers and want to help the community.³² To date, the Community Safety Partnership has reduced violent crime by more than 50 percent in the three Watts housing developments, decreased youth gang membership and activity, and improved residents' sense of safety and well-being when traveling to stores and parks. As crime and quality of life improve, revitalization plans are in the works that would create 1,800 mixed-income homes in addition to commercial areas and parks.

Officers assigned to the Community Safety Partnership began their new assignment with an increase in pay and a promotion, an explicit signal that the Los Angeles Police Department prioritized this work.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Building police-community trust is challenging and time consuming. It requires addressing and moving beyond the legacy of discriminatory and harmful policing practices in many communities of color. It requires a police department committed to collaboration, fairness, and transparency, whose officers are adequately trained, supported, and held accountable by departmental leadership. It requires effective community leaders capable of engaging with police in a constructive and unbiased manner. It requires a sustained investment in building relationships before crises occur.

The local examples highlighted in this brief represent a small sampling of efforts across the country to build police-community trust—many of these approaches are being implemented and replicated in multiple jurisdictions, tailored to best fit local circumstances. For example, Strategies for Youth has trained 23 law enforcement agencies throughout the country to constructively engage with youth. Over 60 communities nationwide are implementing locally adapted community violence prevention strategies based on the model pioneered by Operation Ceasefire.

In September 2014, nearly 100 community advocates, law enforcement leaders, researchers, and violence prevention practitioners gathered at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice to share best practices in positive community-law enforcement engagement. The convening ended with the agreement that the four most important principles to build trust-based relationships between law enforcement and community were accountability, justice, transparency, and integrity. Underlying all four principles was the idea that trust would only develop if both community and law enforcement could reconcile “what was” and be committed to the possibility that trust-based partnerships between community members and law enforcement could be developed and would lead to safer communities.

Police departments must institutionalize effective community engagement throughout their structure. Trainings—both in the academy and in-service—should emphasize that trust and collaboration with the community are necessary for effective policing, and build appropriate skills to achieve them. Departmental criteria for accountability and discipline as well as for promotion should further reflect this commitment, an issue addressed in a forthcoming brief about community-conscious personnel policies. Leadership that demonstrates an unyielding commitment to the principles of community-centered policing is essential.

Meaningful engagement also requires the will from communities—residents must be organized, informed, and committed to a safe, violence-free community and to working with the police as partners. Both the Lifelines for Healing campaign and the Community Safety Partnership in Watts set an important example by requiring that community stakeholders come to the table and by focusing on intentional efforts at leadership development, organizing, and community capacity building to support effective participation. These mutual commitments from police and communities are necessary for sustained change.

Trust will only develop if both community and law enforcement can reconcile “what was” and be committed to the possibility that trust-based partnerships between community members and law enforcement can be developed and will lead to safer communities.

Law enforcement agencies should do the following:

- Commit to making proactive and sustained community engagement practices a high priority at all levels.
- Provide trainings to new recruits and in-service officers on procedural justice, implicit bias, relationship-based policing, mediation, conflict resolution, rumor control, strategic communications, and appropriate engagement with youth based on the science of adolescent brain development.
- Increase language proficiency and cultural competency among law enforcement officers to effectively engage and partner with immigrant communities.
- Work to increase police legitimacy in the eyes of the community by being open and respectful, by clearly explaining procedures and reasons for interactions, and by carrying out duties lawfully, fairly, and in accordance with the community's best interests.
- Cultivate relationships with key community leaders before a crisis and communicate with them without delay when an incident occurs. Provide comprehensive information to the community in a timely and consistent manner.
- Assign police to specific communities for the long term, allowing for more comprehensive, sustained, and relationship-based community engagement.
- Create incentives for officers to engage with community to collaboratively achieve community safety.

Community leaders should do the following:

- Engage a wide array of community partners—such as school officials, youth workers, probation officers, and private youth-serving organizations—to work in partnership with the police to address immediate concerns and develop solutions to longstanding community issues.
- Promote community-driven solutions to achieve community safety that involve law enforcement and other public sector and community-based stakeholders.
- Prioritize capacity and leadership development among community residents and youth to participate effectively in collaborative community safety strategies.
- Be willing to engage in constructive dialogue with police in a sustained partnership.

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Notes

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