

Police-Community Relations

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For over 20 years the Center for Court Innovation has been engaged in reforming the justice system, creating a range of alternative-to-incarceration, youth development, diversion, and anti-violence programs in places like Brownsville, Harlem, Crown Heights, and the Bronx. While each of these efforts is unique, they all attempt to reengineer the relationship between justice agencies and crime-plagued communities. Researchers have documented that our programs have not only improved public safety and reduced the use of incarceration, but have changed the way that people feel about justice. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, for example, local approval ratings of police, prosecutors, and judges have increased threefold since we began work in the neighborhood.

In recent months, we have devoted special attention to the relationship between communities—particularly communities of color—and the police, seeking to foster collaborations between residents and officers, providing police with alternative strategies for protecting public safety, and finding opportunities for informal interactions that can break down barriers, challenge misconceptions, and address tensions. This work is driven by a belief that there is no path to building safe communities that does not involve the police. The police should not be our only response to crime, of course, but we need the police if we are going to transform crime-plagued neighborhoods. We also need them to patrol the streets in ways that are attentive to the latest research and responsive to the concerns of community residents.

What follows are some of the lessons that we have learned from our work on the ground in New York City that might be applicable in other places.

1. POLICE NEED ALTERNATIVES

Part of mending relationships between police and communities is giving officers a larger toolkit, empowering them with crime-fighting strategies that do not lead to increased arrests or incarceration. The Center's community justice centers offer social services and case management in a trusted location, providing police with additional tools for dealing with difficult situations and tricky populations – a place to bring in troubled teens or homeless individuals without necessarily making

an arrest. We are also looking for new ways to divert cases from the justice system. For example, we are working with the New York Police Department and local prosecutors in Brownsville and East Harlem to create a pilot diversion program that will divert 16- and 17-year-olds arrested for minor non-violent offenses to counseling and community service before they ever come before a judge—avoiding the chance of a criminal record or time in jail. This is a fundamental shift in the

way that law enforcement approaches minor offending, and it needs to be nurtured, sustained, and expanded. To further advance this idea, our research department is working on a

multi-site study of police-led diversion programs, with the goal of increasing awareness of promising police-led diversion strategies nationally.

2. EVERY COMMUNITY IS UNIQUE

Time and personal relationships are vital to building trust. Given this, the Center has taken a hyper-local approach to strengthening the legitimacy of the justice system, setting down roots and building decades-long partnerships in neighborhoods like Red Hook, Brownsville, Harlem, and Crown Heights. Building on this platform, we have recently created neighborhood youth justice councils designed to engage young people with local justice system players. For example, the Staten Island Youth Justice Council has embarked on a process of interviewing NYPD officers—as well as defense attorneys, prose-

cutors, and probation officers—to gauge their perceptions of local youth. And in the South Bronx, we are setting the groundwork to hold intimate conversations over pizza between young people who have been involved in the justice system involvement and a small handful of NYPD officers, with the goal of helping each group better understand each other and see each other’s humanity. We believe that these micro-level efforts will promote mutual understanding and that if we can cobble together enough of them over time, we will begin to make a significant difference in a problem that has festered for generations.

3. TREATING LOCAL RESIDENTS WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT WILL HELP THE JUSTICE SYSTEM ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES IN THE LONG RUN

We have seen first-hand in our various operating projects that when justice agencies make the effort to treat people as individuals rather than just processing cases like widgets in a factory, they don’t just make people feel better about their experience – they actually promote voluntary compliance with the law. We have made a significant institutional investment in the concept of procedural justice in recent years. This has included developing new training regimens for judges and other criminal court professionals, rethinking

courthouse signage, and using architecture to reinforce the mission of our programs (for example, eliminating bars, one of the most powerful symbols of the justice system, from the holding cells at the Midtown Community Court). In the days ahead, we will look to bring some of these lessons to our work with police departments in an effort to improve the ways that the police communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, with local residents.

4. DATA HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY

Repairing relationships is more art than science. But data does have an important role to play. When we approach community-based

work, we typically begin with a significant planning phase to understand the complexities underlying the conflict. For example,

before designing the Red Hook Community Justice Center, we conducted a survey of residents to gauge their perspectives on community conditions, perceptions of safety, and attitudes towards justice system players, including the police. That first year, positive opinions did not reach higher than 15 percent for any criminal justice agency. The results were used to shape the program model, and future iterations of the survey documented significantly improved levels of trust as the Justice Center became more established. A similar survey that we performed recently in

Brownsville looked at the relationship between the community and the police. Only 16 percent of surveyed community members responded that the relationship was positive. We also documented the prevalence of “stop-question-and-frisk”—44 percent of the youth surveyed said that they had been stopped by police in the last year. We have supplemented community surveys with focus groups and individual interviews in many neighborhoods. These efforts help to ground our work in data, not just anecdotes.

5. WE CAN BUILD UNDERSTANDING

We can build understanding through dialogue. The Center regularly brings together police and young people for facilitated conversations that allow both sides to speak honestly about their experiences interacting with one another. These police-youth dialogues enable participants to find common ground, build trust, and improve interactions on the street. These dialogues started as an idea from our Youth Justice Board—an after-

school leadership training program for New York high school students. Now, with a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the Center is developing a toolkit on police-youth dialogues that communities around the nation can use to design thoughtful, structured interactions between young people and police officers.

6. YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE VALUABLE RESOURCES

Communities are safer and stronger when police do not see young people as potential criminals. Indeed, the data suggests that teens are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime. We also know that young people can be valuable assets—partners in crime prevention with important wisdom to share. Recently, the NYPD Crime Stoppers program and the Police Foundation came to the Brownsville Community Justice Center to ask young people how to boost participation

in the crime tips hotline. Participating youth developed a neighborhood-specific brand strategy for a new Crime Stoppers campaign designed to encourage young people to be partners in crime prevention. During this process, a group of young people engaged in conversations with both current and retired officers about the historic roots of mistrust, the role that race plays in police-community interactions, and the culture of not “snitching.”

7. INFORMAL INTERACTIONS MATTER

Formal programs and structured dialogues are important. But building informal social connections among community residents

and local police officers is just as important—and sometimes more important. In our neighborhood-focused work, we have sought

to launch a variety of unconventional activities—holiday toy drives, little league baseball leagues, youth photography exhibits—where justice professionals have the chance to interact with local residents, particularly young

people, without any explicit relationship to case processing. Engaging police in these kinds of informal connections can go a long ways towards promoting healthier community relations.

NEXT STEPS

In the days to come, we will look to apply these principles in new places and spread these ideas to new audiences. This work will touch all three core areas of business at the Center for Court Innovation: operations, research, and expert assistance. Going forward, we will find new ways to break down barriers, challenge misconceptions, and address tensions between police and the communities they serve in New York. We will launch new studies designed to document the legitimacy of the justice system—and efforts to improve public perceptions. And we will aid reformers

around the country who want to strengthen police-community relations, including our work on the federal Minority Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, a new collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of Health’s Office of Minority Health and the Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services that seeks to engage public health organizations, police agencies, and community organizers in curbing violence among young people between the ages of 10 and 18.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION

The Center for Court Innovation seeks to help create a more effective and humane justice system by designing and implementing operating programs, performing original

research, and providing reformers around the world with the tools they need to launch new strategies.



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