NEW YORK STATE | Division of Criminal Justice Services
Research Consortium

Police-Community Trust Building: Research Brief

Practitioner
Schenectady Police Department
Utica Police Department

Academic Partner
John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety

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Summary

The Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) funded the Police-Community Trust Building Initiative to foster positive relationships between residents and other stakeholders and police officers in the cities of Schenectady and Utica. DCJS partnered with researchers from the John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety to conduct a process and outcome evaluation of the Trust Building Initiative over a 12-month period.

Background

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, DCJS facilitated a series of discussions among its staff, police officers, and employees of SNUG Street Outreach programs funded and supported by DCJS to build understanding and trust. DCJS modeled these discussions on a process known as Police-Community Reconciliation. Developed by the National Network for Safe Communities, the Police-Community Reconciliation process aims to facilitate open and honest discussions between police and community members, allowing individuals to share their distinct perspectives and experiences.

Recognizing the impact of these candid conversations, DCJS began providing technical assistance to police departments participating in its Gun Involved Violence Elimination (GIVE) initiative that were interested in implementing trust building conversations in their communities. DCJS contracted with the John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety in 2022 to conduct process and outcome analyses for trust building initiatives in Schenectady and Utica.

Program Description:

DCJS established two goals for the trust building initiatives in Schenectady and Utica:

1. Engage in candid and honest conversations about issues that have negatively affected community-police trust, and
2. Show the merits of these types of discussions to other jurisdictions and encourage implementation.

To implement these conversations in both cities, DCJS provided guidance about meeting frequency and the number and characteristics of participants. Meetings should be monthly, limited to two hours, and occur in neutral locations, such as community centers, houses of worship, or public schools. Ideal participants are "open-minded, active listener(s), solution-oriented, articulate, and willing to be candid and respectful." Suitable police participants should have positive relationships with the community, and community participants should have good standing in the community. Guidance also recommended a maximum meeting size of 12 individuals (six police officers and six community members) to foster a sense of closeness and build rapport.

The police chiefs in each city identified lead facilitators for police and community groups. These facilitators selected participants for the trust-building meetings: between seven and eight community members and between 10 and 13 police representatives. During meetings, facilitators moderated conversations and organized discussion agendas. Meeting material typically focused on youth and negative perceptions of the police, parental neglect, use of force, criminal investigations, or officer residency requirements. On average, meetings lasted up to two hours and attendance waned over the course of the evaluation period.

Evaluation Overview:

Throughout the course of the one-year initiative, researchers from the Finn Institute conducted a process and outcome evaluation that provided a detailed overview of meeting and group logistics and participant activities. Researchers documented the participants' candid discussions, which addressed grievances, perceptions, and misconceptions among them. Researchers captured participants' perspectives and experiences throughout the initiative, monitored changes in outlooks over the course of the study, and measured the immediate impacts of the trust-building meetings on participants and their respective groups. The Finn Institute utilized multiple sources to conduct their evaluation, including:

- a series of semi-structured interviews with community and police participants,
- post-meeting surveys of participants,
- direct observation of all meetings; and
- reviews of relevant local media/news.

To establish participants' baseline views about community-police relations, researchers administered semi-structured, virtual interviews prior to the trust-building meetings. Data collected from these interviews described areas of convergence and divergence in the perspectives of each group. Once meetings began, all participants received emails with a link to post-meeting online surveys asking questions about the participants' outlook on policing and community relations, perspectives on the initiative itself, and perspectives on the most recent meeting. Researchers attended each meeting and documented participant attendance and participation, topics discussed, how those topics were received, and areas of agreement and disagreement. Researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews mid-way through the initiative and at its conclusion.

Results:

Researchers noted a few recurring topics central to the conversations across the sites: (1) contemporary challenges facing policing generally (e.g., funding, staffing, recruiting, retention, officer well-being, media portrayals, use of force, investigations); (2) the failure of social institutions; (3) a changing culture for authority; (4) community youth; and (5) extending the reach and expanding the composition of the initiative.

Analyses suggest that community outlook on police can be changed through trust-building discussions in a small group format. In Utica, initial interviews suggest that both community and police participants shared negative perspectives on police-community relations. In early interviews, Utica community participants described discrepancies in police officers' behavior during community outreach activities and in their daily duties. In later interviews, community participants expressed greater trust in the police who participated in trust-building discussions. They also felt they had gained a deeper understanding for policing perspectives and the numerous challenges posed to police. Analyses also suggest that these discussions contributed to new and strengthened relationships between police and community members. Researchers also found engaging in regular discussions can clarify issues or concerns that are particularly important to community members. Police participants reported finding these discussions to be unique opportunities to express their opinions and describe their perspectives in a non-emergency setting. Additionally, conversations prompted by the initiative created a feedback mechanism for conveying community concerns to police leaders, which helped legitimize the process and broadened the potential for actionable change. Interview and survey analysis did not show an increase in trust levels extending beyond meeting participants (e.g., community members did not trust all police, only the police participants).

In Schenectady, there exists a longstanding tradition of facilitating community dialogues, often with the participation of police leaders. For this reason, the introduction of the initiative may not have been as compelling for the intended participant audience. In addition, interactions between community members and police officers through the initiative left some community members feeling as through their existing relationship-building efforts were not valued. This perception resulted in meetings being largely attended by community members who shared similar views with police participants, and dialogues concerning police-community tensions or adverse events tended to be cordial. Surveys administered post-trust-building meetings further revealed that the majority of police and community participants agreed on most of the questions asked and participants and officers expressed optimism that these conversations could lead to greater change in police practices and community perceptions.

Recommendations

The evaluation identified several lessons learned and recommendations for future implementation.

1. Understand the local context.
2. Select credible messengers and participants who are open to honest dialogue and are action oriented.
3. Determine the appropriate group size and inclusivity
4. Select facilitators carefully and train them well.
5. Identify topics for discussion prior to meetings.
6. Include an impartial third party who is not a stakeholder.

Recommendations

1. Understand the local context.

- Clarify the initiative's intended purpose and goals for facilitators and participants to ensure members' efforts are aligned with those objective
- Consider the scope of efforts and local context, along with relevant events, during conversations within sites, so facilitators guide discussion and participants can air any grievances.
- Acknowledge current and historical incidents involving the police that have occurred in the community in future initiatives. Facilitators should acknowledge national and historical context but highlight that the intent for these discussions is to focus on realistic change at the department, community, and neighborhood levels.

2. Select credible messengers and participants who are open to honest dialogue and are action oriented.

- Credible messengers are those who are recognized and respected by the groups they represent for their unique experience, knowledge, or expertise, including those with legal or political backgrounds.
- Avoid participants who display unwavering bias or excessive support for the police.
- Consider diverse age groups and include police leadership and officers less inclined to volunteer; individuals with political power; or those who have personal experience with the criminal justice system.
- Facilitate messaging to the broader community to expand the reach of the initiative.

3. Determine the appropriate group size and inclusivity

- Consider short- and long-term goals when making participant selection, as well as the scope of the initiative being undertaken.
- Limit group size. Participants found smaller groups provided a sense of confidentiality and immunity, fostering frank discussions.
- Recruit from different units, professional experience, and racial diversity within the police department. Expand to include youth in open dialogues with police, either within the existing groups, or to a youth-based trust building group.
- Ensure discussions occur in secure environments and any format changes receive unanimous participant consent.

4. Select facilitators carefully and train them well.

- Ensure facilitators possess the desired attributes and provide them with upfront training on leading and moderating group discussions, mediating difficult conversations, and steering discussions away from unnecessary repetition, while remaining open to revisiting pertinent topics.

5. Identify topics for discussion prior to meetings.

- Evaluate meeting structure for productivity, choosing between pre-specified topics or free-flowing conversation. Gather feedback or input about previous conversations to determine topics for future discussion and if additional discussion time is needed for a specific topic.
- Consider drawbacks and benefits of various meeting formats (in-person, hybrid, virtual).

6. Include an impartial third party who is not a stakeholder.

- Incorporate a third party, like a research partner, to document initiative development, legitimize efforts, and identify areas for agreement where participants could not.

About the Research Consortium

An initiative of the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, the Research Consortium promotes criminal justice research and the use of data and evidence by facilitating partnerships between local practitioners and college and university-based researchers. The research design and conclusions detailed here are the sole work product of the academic partner that conducted the research. Neither DCJS nor the State of New York endorse the program, methodology or results.