



Cities See Some Progress in Building Trust in Police, Report Says

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A 2017 survey of people in high-crime, low-income communities found that only 30% of respondents personally trusted the police. People's apprehension about police was deeply rooted, with only 42% of respondents saying they agreed the police were legitimate authorities in their communities.

These findings are consistent with other surveys that have found that trust in police is at a crisis point, especially in communities of color that experience higher rates of police brutality. The Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, in a 2016 analysis said that the confidence gap between races can lead to real danger because people stop reporting crime. That report noted that "when the police have legitimacy, the law has legitimacy, which encourages compliance and cooperation."

In order to try to improve relationships between police departments and communities where people are apprehensive about law enforcement, the U.S. Department of Justice in 2014 gave a three-year, \$4.75 million grant to a coalition of organizations that launched the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice.

The initiative, which has continued past the initial grant, focuses on procedural justice, implicit bias, and reconciliation. Projects were undertaken in six different cities: Stockton, California; Fort Worth, Texas; Birmingham, Alabama; Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Gary, Indiana.

Newly released reports by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan think tank that is a partner in the initiative, show that while a majority of respondents in these cities still have negative views of police, there has been improvement since the initiative started, especially with regard to procedural justice.

At the start of the initiative, only 30% of respondents in the six cities agreed that police "treat people with dignity and respect." By the end of the pilot period, the number rose to 38%. Similarly, 56% of people initially said that they believed police officers treated them differently based on their race. That number dropped to 49% by the end.

Procedural justice focuses on how individual interactions with officers shape communal views of the police and a community's willingness to comply with the law and work with police. Officers trained in procedural justice follow four guidelines: providing the opportunity for residents to tell their side of the story, treating residents with dignity, explaining the reasons for their decisions, and conveying fairness. The goal is to break down historical mistrust with small interactions.

At a National Initiative board meeting in 2018, Tracey Meares, the director of the Justice Collaboratory at Yale, likened procedural justice to the power dynamic between parents and children during punishment. Parents who talk to their child as opposed to beating them don't give up power, but instead act authoritatively instead of like authoritarians.

"People often think that procedural justice is interpersonal or incident-based...but this is where the history piece comes in," she said. "When you strip procedural justice of the historical component and think about it primarily in transactional terms, how the person is being treated in the instance, it's really hard to think about all of the necessary components of institutional reform...[just being nice] doesn't change the uniform they are wearing and the connotations associated with their uniform."

David Kennedy, the director for the National Network for Safe Communities, said that the initiative approached some police departments with survey results showing that only a third of respondents felt safe around the police and half believed that police officers treated them differently based on their race. That helped illustrate that procedural justice is about more than police officers just "being nicer"—it's about changing deeply held beliefs.

"We were able to say to [law enforcement partners]: "Guess what? It's not only the bad people in the neighborhood who don't like you, there are good people who also don't like you," he said. "That's why we are working on procedural justice...you are wearing your history. It's not just about you—it's very heavily historically informed."

The second pillar of the initiative's reforms focuses on implicit bias, and training police officers to recognize how their unconscious biases might shape their interactions with people or communities, particularly African American and Hispanic ones. The recent analysis showed that officers' views were marginally better aligned with bias concepts after the training, and that officers in particular learned how stereotypes can influence individual behavior.

The third pillar of the initiative concentrates on reconciliation, and encourages police departments to have frank, community-wide conversations about law enforcement's role in historic and present racial harms. Here, the initiative found a stand-out model in Stockton, where the police chief, Eric Jones, had declared his intention to fix broken community trust.

The city, which in 2010 ranked among the top ten cities in the country for violent crime rates, focused on reconciliation from the start of their participation in the initiative in 2015. The police hosted 26 listening departments by 2018, more than any other city involved, and convened special sessions in communities with the highest levels of violence.

Joseph Silva, the public information officer for the Stockton Police Department said that Jones recognized how important it was for the police department to acknowledge the role of law enforcement in communities that has caused distrust over the years. "As a law enforcement agency, it is our responsibility to begin these conversations and to take race relations head-on," he said. "By initially focusing on reconciliation, the Stockton Police Department was able to begin building meaningful relationships with the community it served. We have learned that the police will not impact crime the way we need to if we are not gaining the trust of the community. Having that trust makes our jobs safer while helping us solve more crimes and making our city a safer place."