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POSSIBILITIES FOR POLICE-COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

A Public Engagement Research Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 2005

Will Friedman and Lara Saxman

with support from
Annie E. Casey Foundation
and
The New York Community Trust

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization dedicated to nonpartisan public policy research. Founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich, the social scientist and author, Public Agenda is well respected for its influential public opinion polls and balanced citizen education materials. Its mission is to inform leaders about the public's views and to educate citizens about government policy.

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INTRODUCTION

This project explores possibilities for dialogue between average citizens and police officers. Is real dialogue among such participants possible, or will it inevitably degenerate into aggressive and defensive posturing? If it *is* possible, what kinds of discussions develop, and toward what practical ends can they be applied?

By dialogue, we mean something very different from the usual yammer of gripe-filled public hearings, empty political rhetoric, contentious talk radio, pronouncements by pundits and the myriad other spectacle that substitute for true deliberation in today's public square. We mean instead an honest exchange of views on important public issues, among people from varied perspectives, under conditions where power dynamics, political posturing and defensiveness are minimized to the greatest extent possible.

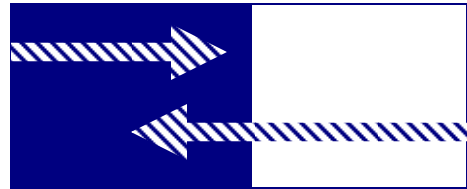
We believe that forging connections through dialogue has the potential not only to effect the individuals involved, but also to ripple through the larger community. Where police-community relations are positive, the police can fight crime more effectively. Where crime is under control, struggling communities can better organize and promote their own well-being. And where communities are self-organizing, there is less criminal behavior in the first place.

Methodology

Public Agenda, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the New York Community Trust, conducted fieldwork in New Haven, Connecticut; San Antonio, Texas; and New York City during the latter half of 2004.

Background Research and Development of Four "Choicework" Guides

Across the three sites, we interviewed numerous law enforcement officials, from patrol officers to upper brass, and held 12 focus groups with various kinds of residents. In addition to providing valuable insights



If you want to know what's wrong with our community, you have to be able to talk to the community, not at the community, the same way the community needs to talk to the police.

New Haven resident

You need to have them sit down—not just your community leaders or your community cops, but have all your cops involved in community meetings. Let them hear exactly what the people are saying. Let me hear it.

New York City police officer

It's one thing to talk. It's another thing to really hear from their point of view, to really see from their side.

New York City resident



that helped us facilitate the project’s pilot dialogue sessions (see below), the focus groups helped us test and refine “choicework” guides on the following topics:

- *Preventing Crime, Promoting Public Safety*
- *Improving Police-Community Relations*
- *Ensuring School Safety*
- *Preventing Terrorism and Protecting Civil Rights*

Each of the four choicework guides offers several possible approaches to addressing the issue at hand, providing a structure and framework for getting the conversation going. The *Improving Police-Community Relations* guide is reproduced at the end of this report, and all four guides are available from Public Agenda.

Pilot Dialogues

Public Agenda conducted five pilot dialogue sessions across the three sites. These sessions brought together several police officers and anywhere from 8 to 30 members of the general public. Each employed one or more of the choicework guides prepared for the project. Public Agenda staff moderated the discussions.

Overview

A full report on the initiative may be downloaded in PDF format from Public Agenda at:

http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pdfs/police_public_engagement_2005.pdf

This executive summary discusses the report’s major themes in brief. They are:

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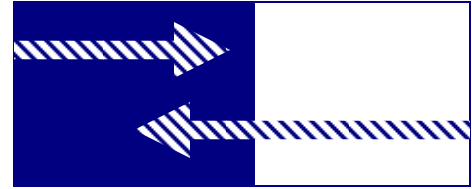
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I. RESIDENTS STRONGLY FAVOR DIRECT CONTACT AND DIALOGUE WITH THE POLICE



We conducted focus groups with residents of San Antonio, New Haven and New York City to get their read on relations with police and the possibilities for more dialogue and cooperation. The vast majority wanted to talk and work with the police to reduce crime in their neighborhoods, improve the prospects for their kids and, in some instances, alleviate tensions with the police that diminish the quality of life in their communities.

How many times have you had a chance just to sit down and talk to a policeman? I've very seldom had that chance.

San Antonio resident

If the cop on the beat would make four contacts a shift, and spend three minutes with each one of those contacts, over a period of time there would be a ripple effect throughout the community.

San Antonio resident
(white, male)

People wanted to get to know the police as real people, to move beyond stereotypes, and hoped the police would want to do the same. They thought dialogue could accomplish that.

Years ago there were a couple of cops that used to walk around and you got to know their faces. They got to know our faces. You knew who they were.

New York resident
(white, male)

If a policeman is sitting across from me, then we are going to know what each other's life is like. [Then] I know when he puts on that uniform he has to play the role he is in. You have to have respect for him and [remember] that he is a human being underneath, and vice versa.

New Haven resident
(white, female)

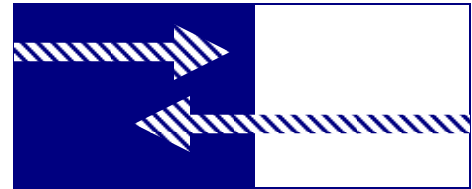
If you really want it to work well, [the police] have to get to know the people, especially the young people. The young people need to get to know them, not just as policemen, but as individuals.

New Haven resident
(African American, male)



II. POLICE ARE AMBIVALENT ABOUT INCREASED COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The patrol officers we interviewed were more divided on the subject of increased community contact and cooperation, or “community policing.” Although some were comfortable with and supportive of it, others had mixed feelings, and still others did not think much of it at all.



Everybody has different opinions about community policing. It's hard to say.

New York City police officer

For some officers, the concept of community policing just seemed to fit like a glove. They spoke of it as a way to fight crime, improve the quality of life for residents, and improve the quality of working life for themselves.

Without community support, what's the police force other than an occupying force?

San Antonio police officer
(white, male)

Community policing, I do that with all my people in my square. They've all got my cell phone...They call me. They say, "Hey, this person's doing this..."

San Antonio police officer
(Latino, male)

They want cops to talk to them. You don't want a cop to come up to you and treat you like a perpetrator...

New York City police officer
(Latino, male)

If you care about your cops...not getting into volatile situations, then you need to have your cops a little bit more involved with the community.

New York City police officer
(Latino, male)

Others were less enthusiastic about community involvement. It's worth doing, they seemed to be saying, but not at the expense of more important areas of police work. Still other officers viewed it as a waste of time—as just another “gripe session”—or worse, as dangerous.

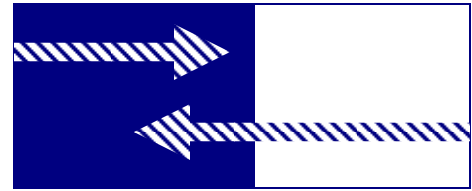
If you're gonna put me in a neighborhood that I will probably get shot at every time I got out of my car, I don't want the community policing, that's not going to work for me.

New Haven police officer
(white, male)



III. OBSTACLES TO POLICE-COMMUNITY COOPERATION

Beyond the ambivalence on the part of some police officers noted in the last section, a number of obstacles to police-community cooperation became apparent during the course of the project.



I feel a very “us against them” thing.

New York City resident

Unrealistic Expectations

From a police perspective, citizens’ expectations can sometimes be unrealistic and inappropriate. As one officer who was notably comfortable with community-oriented policing put it, sometimes the community thinks the police are “supposed to be nice” even when the situation calls for them to be all business. As he explained:

When I come to a scene, especially if my partner’s gotten there first, my job is not initially to make friends with everyone. My job is to cover my buddy who’s handling the call.... I think the citizen, when they see me come to the scene, would like me to say, “Hello, how are you doing?” and shake their hands.

San Antonio police officer
(African American, male)

Mistrust and Racial Tensions

Mistrust and cynicism are obstacles to better relations among citizens and all sorts of institutions and professionals these days, and the police are no exception.

I don’t trust the police. The last person I would look for if I was in trouble was a policeman.

New York City resident
(Latino, female)

For their part, police officers bring their own brand of mistrust to the relationship—a sort of occupational hazard that comes with dealing with criminals more often and more intensively than with law-abiding citizens.

The minute a person approaches a cop, the cop is right on alert, like, “Okay, something is going to happen.” It’s not always like that.

New York City police officer
(Latino, male)

Sometimes the mistrust clearly reflects unresolved racial tensions.

We had [a] meeting for parents. I looked at one officer...who was a white cop. It was like he just couldn't wait to get out there and say, "I'm going to check this one out, I'm going to check that one." I'm surprised he didn't check us as we were coming in. I could see no sincerity.

New Haven resident
(African American, male)

Some police officers—generally minorities themselves—agreed that racial tensions can be a significant hurdle to improving relations with the community. Others, though, thought people often see things like racial profiling where they don't exist. They seemed not only frustrated, but perplexed at the tendency of citizens to interpret police work in racial terms.

The funny thing that I always get is when you pull somebody over...they'll always say it's a profiling thing. What am I supposed to do, the community is Hispanic! How is it profiling? Am I supposed to wait for that one Chinese guy that drives through the neighborhood once a week and then stop him?

New York City police officer
(white, male)

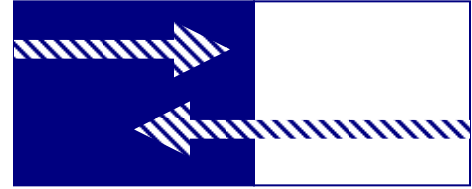
Other Obstacles

Other obstacles to police-community cooperation came to light through the research. These included the dangers in crime-ridden neighborhoods of being seen attending meetings with the police, and the uneven sense of community rootedness in a large city like New York where many residents are highly mobile.



IV. WORKING THROUGH THE OBSTACLES: DIALOGUE DESIGN AND RESULTS

The dialogue sessions with residents and police officers demonstrated that under favorable conditions, meaningful dialogue between police professionals and ordinary citizens can occur, even across language barriers. The results have the potential to inform policy, improve communication, create mutual respect and responsibility and promote public safety.



If we have interactions with the police like this, maybe we could make a big improvement.

San Antonio resident

Designing Productive Dialogue

The dialogue design was adapted from principles and strategies Public Agenda has developed and employed in countless initiatives over its 30-year history. These include the following:

- Establishing local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Including a diverse cross section of participants “beyond the usual suspects”
- Holding dialogue in small, diverse groups
- Structuring dialogue with nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (“choicework”)
- Facilitating and documenting the dialogue with trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders
- Following up dialogue with various kinds of action

Each dialogue in this initiative brought together several police officers and anywhere from 8 to 30 members of the general public. In each session, we tackled one of the following topics:

- *Preventing Crime, Promoting Public Safety*
- *Improving Police-Community Relations*
- *Ensuring School Safety*
- *Preventing Terrorism and Protecting Civil Rights*

For each of the four topics, we developed or adapted a “choicework” discussion guide (available from Public Agenda). These guides introduced the issue at hand and offered several possible approaches to addressing it, providing a structure and framework for getting the conversation going. Public Agenda staff moderated the discussions.

Creating a Civil and Honest Exchange of Views

Residents and police officers alike began these sessions tentatively, as if they were getting their bearings, but very soon they warmed up and were exchanging views in response to the discussion materials and to one another's comments.

As some officers explained, outside of the occasional highly structured public hearing, the police typically interact with criminals, victims, activist-critics or strong supporters of the police department. Police rarely, if ever, engage average people in deep conversation as they were able to do in these sessions.

Notably, the dialogues did not veer toward gripe sessions and defensiveness. Instead, they were decidedly civil in tone—yet were high-energy affairs in which people still managed to make their needs and criticisms known. After several of the discussions, participants stayed and continued talking, and residents and officers exchanged contact information.

Increasing Mutual Understanding and Responsibility

Most residents and many police officers anticipated that dialogue would lead to greater mutual respect and understanding. The actual sessions bore this out.

I've been pulled over in little towns. In seeing it in your [policeman's] eyes, you're watching out for your community, the community that you work for. That was something that was enlightening to me, because I didn't think of it that way. I just thought they were picking on me.

San Antonio resident
(Latino, female)

A lot of times, you don't think about explaining yourself. The thing that I learned [today] is that 15 to 20 seconds to explain yourself, "This is why I am doing it..." That's one thing I can say that I learned from here, that I'll always force myself to remember: You need to explain yourself when you do something.

San Antonio police officer
(white, male)

As the conversations progressed, residents often spoke about ways to increase mutual responsibility, rather than focusing just on the things they wanted the police to do for them.

No matter what the...standard of living may be, as taxpayers we have a lot of power, a lot of control. But if we don't stand together and unite and tell these people what we expect, we won't get it. I'm not saying [the police] have to change all their policies, but we, as a community, we are willing to work with you guys—and we need you to work with us.

New Haven resident
(African American, male)



Informing Policy and Action

Even these modest, onetime experiments in dialogue tended to lead toward actionable results. Ideas for action that emerged from the discussions included the following:

- Creating neighborhood-based youth peer courts to resolve small-scale problems before they require police intervention
- Working to improve funding for the police department to improve response time to citizen calls
- Translating more informational materials into Spanish and distributing them in new ways
- Having a community leader speak to officers during roll call to sensitize officers to community concerns and cultural differences
- Organizing events similar to National Night Out as community-building exercises and opportunities for police officers and residents to interact outside of crime situations

V. POLICE-COMMUNITY DIALOGUE IN ACTION: A NEW YORK CITY TEST CASE

Public Agenda moderated a two-hour dialogue in Jackson Heights, Queens, between largely non-English-speaking members of the Latino immigrant community and members of the NYPD, several of whom did not speak Spanish. Working through the auspices of the Vera Institute of Justice and the Latin American Integration Center (LAIC), we helped to organize and facilitate this pilot session to further test the possibilities for productive police-community dialogue—this time across marked language and cultural divides. To overcome the language barrier, a Spanish-speaking moderator co-facilitated the session, and two translators ensured that everyone understood every statement made.

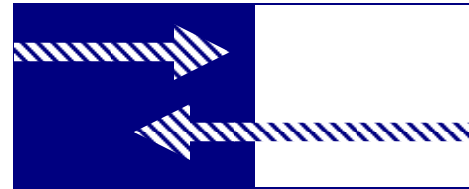
In many ways, this dialogue was very much like the others in the project—frank yet civil in tone, tending toward mutual responsibility rather than finger-pointing, concerned with both formal policy and informal human interactions. Naturally, there were some unique aspects as well, such as discussion of how concerns about immigration status can affect people’s willingness to turn to the police.

Do Sweat the Small Stuff

As we heard in prior citizen-police dialogues, it became apparent that little things, such as a 15-second explanation of why a particular action is being taken, can make a big difference.

Why is it that [the police] have the right to throw out the food [of street vendors]? I saw how they grabbed the tamales; they threw [them] down to the street. Isn't it just sufficient to...give them a ticket of some sort? They are honest people.

New York City resident
(Latino immigrant, female)



The Latin community wants to leave here convinced that the good intentions of the police and us advance us toward something; that in the next meeting, we have progressed, even if it's just a bit.

New York City resident

We will do our best to get out to the community information in Spanish about the programs and services available to them, as well as their rights and responsibilities when interacting with the police—it's a two way street.

New York City police officer



The food is evidence at that point. Being it is perishable food, we are not allowed to keep it. We have to throw it in the garbage. That's the reason why.

New York City police officer
(male)¹

[More people] need to understand that justification that you just gave. Instead of just throwing out food [without explanation], it would be a good idea to explain to the people why that is done.

New York City resident
(Latino immigrant, female)

Indeed, perhaps the strongest area of agreement between the residents and the police was the idea that even seemingly small changes in behavior could go a long way to alleviating tensions.

It seems kind of funny that little things like a greeting or finding a way to throw away the tamales that's not humiliating are important. To make a tamale it takes a long, long time. To throw it away takes very little. It is with the little subtle things that we are going to be able in some way to build a better relationship.

LAIC director, Ana Maria Archila

I was going to go back to my precinct to speak to every officer [about today's conversation]. As I was sitting here, I got a better idea. I would like [Ms. Archila] to speak at our roll calls.

New York City police officer
(male)

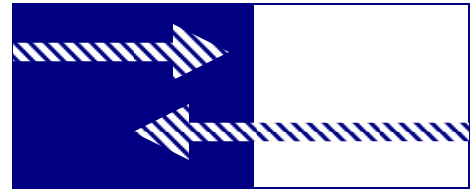
¹ Because this session was audiotaped rather than videotaped, we could not be sure of the race/ethnicity of the police officers making comments, so we do not identify that variable as we do in other parts of the report.



VI. CONCLUSIONS

From Pilot to Practice

How dialogue, such as the pilot sessions described in this report, might be applied on a larger scale is easy to imagine: Under the umbrella of its community-policing initiatives, departments could partner with local organizations to sponsor and facilitate neighborhood-based forums on any number of topics, including the ones created for this project.



It's the community that's going to get everybody through everything because of how they stick together—that's the way I see it.

New York City police officer

Alternatively, dialogue could begin on the community side, initiated by community-based organizations and their partners, as was the case in the New York City dialogue described in Section V. In either case, organizers and moderators can be trained to build local capacity, so community conversations can occur on a regular basis.

Strengthening Community Policing and Communities Themselves

The kinds of outcomes that the pilot dialogues in this initiative were moving toward indicate that they can improve police-community relations and catalyze collaborations that address public safety problems. They also promise more than that—they can strengthen communities themselves. A major theme in several of the sessions was that communities need to organize themselves in order to improve their neighborhoods, be stronger advocates and have less need for the police in the first place.

We must be involved in our own lives and our own communities if we really want change.

New Haven resident
(African American, male)

You can't live in a neighborhood and say, "Okay, I'm not going to get involved." You have to get involved, because if you don't, all chaos and hell breaks loose, and no cop can protect you from that. They're not going to put a cop on every block 24 hours a day. So the community has to take a lot of responsibility for what's going on as well.

New York City police officer
(Latino, male)

It remains to be seen if police departments and communities decide to invest in public dialogue and engagement in this way. We hope that by demonstrating some of the possibilities this project can help inform that decision.



CHOICEWORK DISCUSSION GUIDE

IMPROVING POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS: WHAT'S THE BEST APPROACH?

It seems to be a reality of modern urban life that from time to time tensions can develop between law enforcement and community members or groups. Given this reality, it is worth doing some thinking about the best ways to prevent these tensions from developing in the first place and resolving them when they do.

To help you and your neighbors begin talking about this issue, we've developed a framework that offers three contrasting approaches to improving police-community relations. Which makes the most sense for this community—and why?

APPROACH 1: IMPROVE POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY

According to this approach, whether it's by a few bad apples or reflects a more systemic problem in a police department, much of the tensions that occur between police and the community come about because of inappropriate police behavior. That being the case, the most important way to help ensure good relations is by having strong accountability measures that enforce proper and professional police conduct. Doing so will help prevent police behaviors that can provoke problems with the community, or promptly identify and address them if they do occur.

Therefore we should:

- Create clear policies about things like racial profiling and car stops
- Keep careful and systematic records to determine what is actually happening on the streets
- Put a strong civilian review board in place, so appointed or elected citizens can help investigate and resolve problems that develop

Those who like this approach say, "Strong accountability can go a long way towards preventing problems that develop between the police and the community."

But those who disagree say, "These traditional accountability measures have been around a long time and still too many problems remain."

APPROACH 2: INCREASE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

According to this approach, many problems could be avoided, or more easily resolved, if the police better understood the different cultural groups in today's diverse communities. Likewise, community members need to better understand the nature of police work, including the risks and challenges officers face in their jobs every day, and the reasons for the procedures they use in their work.

Therefore we should:

- Train police in the best ways to interact with the many cultures they come into contact with in today's diverse society. Hiring more minority policemen or requiring officers to live in the



cities where they work might also be effective ways to increase understanding of the community by the police.

- Educate citizens about the risks, challenges and procedures of police work through school programs, community liaison officers and television and newspaper specials
- Create opportunities for more contact and dialogue between police and community members through citizen watch organizations and well-designed community meetings that allow for the constructive exchange of views

Those who like this approach say, “The community and the police need to understand each other better if they’re going to avoid the tensions that make things harder for citizens and the police alike.”

But those who disagree say, “The best way for the police to have good community relations is to do a professional, effective job fighting crime, and that’s what they should be concentrating on.”

APPROACH 3: COMMUNITIES SHOULD TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEMSELVES

This perspective recognizes that police can sometimes unnecessarily create problems with community members and groups. But it also recognizes that in communities where there is a lot of crime and instability, there will be a lot more police activity, and in that environment tensions between the police and community groups are virtually inevitable. A great deal of police-community tensions can be avoided if communities take more responsibility for themselves, and transform themselves into healthier, more stable places to live that are less plagued by crime.

This means community residents and local leaders should organize themselves to:

- Revitalize the economy of poor neighborhoods
- Create more structure and hope for young people by improving their schools and making sure they’re supervised and have constructive ways to occupy their time when they’re not in school
- Improve the quality of life by cleaning up parks or organizing citizen watch organizations that make the streets safer

Those who like this approach say, “Strong, healthy neighborhoods are as much a key to improving relations with the police as anything else.”

But those who disagree say, “We can’t wait until neighborhoods transform themselves—who knows how long that will take? We need to do things to ensure better police-community relations *now*.”



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About Public Agenda

Co-founded in 1975 by distinguished public opinion analyst and social scientist Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda brings 30 years of experience in engaging the public in productive dialogue on tough issues, conducting in-depth public opinion studies and creating nonpartisan citizen education materials. It has helped bridge the gap between leaders and the public on dozens of challenging issues, including education, tax reform, health care, the environment, police-community relations and foreign policy. Its award-winning Web site is a prime resource on issues and public opinion for journalists, educators, researchers and the general public.

Public Agenda's work has won praise for its credibility and fairness by Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, and experts and decision makers with varied views on controversial issues. Its work regularly appears in such media as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, the Associated Press, *USA Today*, *Parade*, *Los Angeles Times*, CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN and Fox News.

Contact

For more information on Public Agenda's public engagement programs or to receive a copy of the full report on police-community relations, please contact Lara Saxman at 212-686-6610, visit our Web site at www.publicagenda.org or e-mail us at info@publicagenda.org.

