



**National Network
For Safe Communities
at JOHN JAY COLLEGE**

POLICE-COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION

ISSUE BRIEF

Police-Community Reconciliation is a method of facilitating frank engagement between harmed communities and police that allows them to address grievances, misconceptions, and historical tensions, and reset relationships. Based on transitional justice and global truth and reconciliation practices, it is an opportunity for institutions to reckon with past harms, investigating how they continue into the present, and taking action to repair and reform. It is a way to engage people who have been excluded from systems in the work of reshaping them.

While exclusion and harm have been present in all parts of American law and society, police have often been the face of its sharpest legal abuses against marginalized communities, and particularly of those against Black people. They have been tasked with enforcing slavery, convict leasing, Jim Crow segregation, and then mass incarceration. From lynchings through present-day gun violence, law enforcement has often failed to protect Black communities from violence, often subjecting them to intrusive, disrespectful, or violent tactics at the same time. The aim of Police-Community Reconciliation is for communities and law enforcement to reckon with these difficult truths as a foundation for making real, meaningful change. It begins with open and honest dialogue—from which they can build mutual respect, empathy, trust, and a better way forward together.

RECONCILIATION IN STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA

“I wish I could go back to the day I started and have this kind of conversation. I would have been a whole different police officer.”

- *Deputy Chief Trevor Womack*

“It felt really empowering to know that my voice mattered, and that it mattered in a way that was going to change the game for other families.”

- *Tashante McCoy-Ham, Community Organizer*

“Community members say, if we’re not comfortable coming to the police, street justice prevails. More than ever, I see trust in police connected to reducing violent crime . . . And when trust goes up it’s safer for the officers going into neighborhoods, because there’s less animosity and confrontation.”

- *Chief Eric Jones*

Read more:

[A Police Department’s Difficult Assignment: Atonement](#)

[The Police Chief Who Learned to Listen](#)

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

- Community members and police partnered with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the University of Alabama at Birmingham to create a training on local history for new officers.
- Listening sessions with survivors of domestic violence in Birmingham uncovered the need for a new Special Victims Unit and updated Orders of Protection policies.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

- The police department created a civilian Community Navigators program to improve cultural competence in the department and sometimes resolve calls without police.
- The 2020 killing of George Floyd created a severe crisis of confidence in the Minneapolis Police Department. Years of work to build trust allowed Chief Medaria Arradondo to remain chief and serve as a partner in managing public safety through the difficult times that followed.

LEGITIMACY & MISTRUST

Police legitimacy is the public's trust and confidence in police. A growing body of research has shown a relationship between negative perceptions of police legitimacy and high rates of serious violence in a neighborhood.¹ Voluntary compliance with the law is associated with higher levels of legitimacy. Mistrust and negative perceptions of police effectiveness make people less likely to cooperate with police investigations into violence and homicide,² less likely to report to or cooperate with police when they are victims of violence themselves,³ and more likely to carry illegal firearms or resort to violence as a means of protection when they are in danger.⁴ The roots of our crisis in policing extend beyond the present, and beyond policing itself, into history and the broader systems that have made some communities more subject to the law's punishment than its protection.⁵ The solutions lie deeper, too.

POLICE-COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION

NNSC's Police-Community Reconciliation framework is an approach to building common ground adapted from transitional justice processes like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa. Communities and law enforcement name the harms that have been done; encourage those who caused harm to acknowledge and commit to repairing it; give voice to the harmed to share their experiences and have them honored; take concrete steps to repair those harms; and create relationships and structures to make change going forward, informed by the reconciliation process.

These are the basic building blocks of the Police-Community Reconciliation process:

- **Acknowledgment of harm** by law enforcement leaders and other public officials
- **Listening sessions** where police hear directly from harmed communities
- **Narrative collection** to share personal experiences of harm with the broader community
- **Fact finding** to establish a consensus record of local harm
- **Commitment to ongoing change and repair** through policy, practice, and strategy, including steps to address existing and past harms

In practice, this looks different in each community, but these elements are constants. Police open the process with acknowledgment and commitment to listening and progress, and then invite members of affected communities to guide it. They demonstrate their seriousness with initial changes to policy and practice focused on transparency, respect, and open communication. By investigating, publicly acknowledging, and committing to address uncomfortable truths, law enforcement demonstrates that they value community members' experiences and are willing to learn and improve. With direction from communities, this coalition can pursue concrete measures to repair harm through actions like voiding outstanding warrants, fines, or fees caused by profligate enforcement; as well as longer-term efforts to prevent those harms from repeating, like procedural justice training and departmental policy reviews. Reform efforts take on greater meaning when they are based in a clear recognition of the harm that made them necessary. Ultimately, the harms, needs, and other insights revealed in the reconciliation process can inform a new approach to public safety, in which communities are able to make decisions that affect them.

America has never truly faced its history and made a clear break with and rejection of racial harms, or of many other forms of systemic oppression. There is a growing chorus of calls for this kind of work to be taken up at all levels of government, by many types of institutions, from public safety to public health, and for different and intersecting communities—including survivors of intimate partner and sexual violence, LGBTQIA+ communities, and Indigenous peoples. Because harm by police to marginalized communities is acute and visible, police have an opportunity to lead by example and confront it. Reconciliation is a moral imperative and an essential way forward.

The **National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College** supports cities to implement and advance proven strategies to reduce violence and improve public safety, minimize arrest and incarceration, strengthen communities, and improve relationships between law enforcement and communities.

- ¹ Corsaro, Nicholas, James Frank, and Murat Ozer. "Perceptions of police practice, cynicism of police performance, and persistent neighborhood violence: An intersecting relationship." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 43, no. 1 (2015): 1-11; Dawson, Andrew. "The Belief in State Legitimacy and Homicide: A Cross-National Analysis." *The Sociological Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2017): 552-575; Kane, Robert J. "Compromised police legitimacy as a predictor of violent crime in structurally disadvantaged communities." *Criminology* 43, no. 2 (2005): 469-498; Kirk, David S., and Andrew V. Papachristos. "Cultural mechanisms and the persistence of neighborhood violence." *American journal of sociology* 116, no. 4 (2011): 1190-1233.
- ² Brunson, Rod K., and Brian A. Wade. "'Oh hell no, we don't talk to police' Insights on the lack of cooperation in police investigations of urban gun violence." *Criminology & Public Policy* 18, no. 3 (2019): 623-648.
- ³ Kwak, Hyounggon, Rick Dierenfeldt, and Susan McNeeley. "The code of the street and cooperation with the police: Do codes of violence, procedural injustice, and police ineffectiveness discourage reporting violent victimization to the police?." *Journal of criminal justice* 60 (2019): 25-34.
- ⁴ Barragan, Melissa, Nicole Sherman, Keramet Reiter, and George E. Tita. "'Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't' Perceptions of Guns, Safety, and Legitimacy among Detained Gun Offenders." *Criminal justice and behavior* 43, no. 1 (2016): 140-155.
- ⁵ Bell, Monica C. "Police reform and the dismantling of legal estrangement." *The Yale Law Journal* (2017): 2054-2150.