



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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF HARM

RECONCILIATION PRACTICE BRIEF

Acknowledgements of harm—clear and specific statements about the harmful impacts of policing, delivered by police leaders—are the first step towards creating meaningful conversations about repair. Stating plainly that what happened was real and matters, when those truths have so often been swept under the rug, lends credibility to commitments to change and collaboration. Just as in interpersonal relationships, when harms go unnamed, they continue to create tension and distrust. By openly taking responsibility for these harms on behalf of their department and the broader institution of policing, police leaders make their work to build legitimacy more effective.

In the absence of acknowledgement, communities can feel that their police department endorses or is indifferent to the role policing has played in enforcing racist laws and systems, as well as harms such as abuses by individual officers, damaging policies, and failures of protection. Being frank is the first step in demonstrating understanding and a serious intent to change.

POLICE-COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION FRAMEWORK

The National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) has developed a framework for law enforcement agencies to improve relationships with the communities they serve:

- Acknowledgment of harm
- Listening
- Narrative collection
- Fact finding
- Commitment to ongoing change and repair

This brief discusses the first action: acknowledgement of harm. Read more about the reconciliation framework in the [Police-Community Reconciliation Issue Brief](#)

WHY ACKNOWLEDGE HARM

“As I said, it’s all about trust. And how do we, as a police department, earn that from all the people we serve?”

First, there must be a hard, honest moment of truth. [...] These many years of racist policies and practices have caused—and continue to cause—immeasurable harm, trauma, discrimination, and injustice for so many in the United States. It exists in all aspects of society, including in policing. Police have always been an inexorable part of that story.”

- NYPD Commissioner Dermot Shea, Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AS A PRACTICE

Acknowledgement should become a routine part of how police leaders discuss their work. This messaging should be woven into larger public speaking engagements and small community meetings and conversations. Anywhere that unspoken harm creates tension, there is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by talking about it instead.

ACKNOWLEDGING HISTORICAL EVENTS

“I am sorry and distressed that the Tulsa Police Department did not protect its citizens during the tragic days of 1921. I've heard things said like, ‘Well, that was a different time.’ That excuse doesn't hold water with me.”

- *Tulsa Chief of Police Chuck Jordan, public event for literacy, legacy, and movement in Tulsa's Greenwood District, 2013*

ACKNOWLEDGING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

“My own street drug enforcement efforts were well-intended but had an impact I would not have consciously chosen. In retrospect, we should have been far more engaged with those in the communities where we were doing our high-impact, zero tolerance type policing; to obtain the consent of those we were policing.”

- *Pittsburgh Chief of Police Cameron McLay, 2015*

ACKNOWLEDGING PRESENT HARM

“I'm ashamed of myself. If I have an issue in the Black community, I have a phone full of people I can call. I realize I don't have anyone I can call that represents your community. That's my fault and I want to change it.”

- *Birmingham Chief of Police A. C. Roper, LGBTQ listening session, 2016*

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- Announcing an improvement in policy or practice is an opportunity to discuss the negative impacts the change is meant to remedy.
- At a call-in, police explain that they are addressing violence in a new way because past methods over-policed the community, but did not keep them safe.
- When community members are invited to share their experiences in a listening session, police should set the tone by opening with an acknowledgement.
- National holidays such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth are occasions to talk about the role of police in past systems of anti-Black racism, whether leaders are making formal remarks or taking a moment to acknowledge the date's importance during other routine business.
- Similarly, events that are locally significant, or important to particular communities, such as indigenous people or survivors of intimate partner violence, present opportunities to tailor the acknowledgement message for specific audiences and themes.
- Other natural settings for acknowledgement include churches, barbershops, and civic organizations, where police leadership can visit and demonstrate their understanding and commitment face-to-face.

PREPARING FOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- Holding conversations inside the department about harm and why acknowledgement matters can help prevent tension and misunderstandings. Police executives should begin with supervisors, and then explain their intentions and hear concerns from rank-and-file officers.
- Police leaders can practice with and ask for feedback from members of the community they already have relationships with.

- When discussing harms of the past, it is important to also acknowledge that not all wrongs that must be righted are historical. Critical harms have occurred recently and by people still on the job and wearing the uniform.
- Not every acknowledgement includes an apology, but an apology delivered sincerely can make an acknowledgement more powerful.
- Police leaders should be prepared to explain how their acknowledgement will lead to action, whether that means a specific policy change or a plan to collaborate meaningfully with community members.

CONNECTING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO ACTION

Acknowledgements of harm should lay the groundwork for action-oriented changes in policy and practice, in the eyes of both the police and the community. Taking responsibility for previous ills becomes the first step towards shaping a more just law enforcement culture and achieving a new vision of policing. As leadership recognizes the ongoing impact of such harms on the community, they commit to continued repair, improvement, and community partnership. Reconciliation works best when police leadership is willing to be bold and specific about where policing has erred in the past and why it should change in important and fundamental ways going forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ADDS MEANING TO ACTION

“A move by the police to, for example, void outstanding warrants could be seen as a positive step for any number of reasons. But if that move is explicitly linked to the harmful impact of past practices—and is thus seen explicitly as not just good public policy, but something owed to the community and intended to repair harm—policy change can have a different, deeper, and more constructive meaning. It may then be viewed not simply as a policy change or reform, but as actual reparation for harm.”

- Kennedy, David, and Jonathan Ben-Menachem. "Moving toward an American police-community reconciliation framework." *The Cambridge Handbook of Policing in the United States* (2019): 563-80.

FURTHER READING

Carranza, Ruben, Cristián Correa, and Elena Naughton. *More Than Words: Apologies as a Form of Reparation*. International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015, <https://www.ictj.org/resource-library/more-words-apologies-form-reparation>.

National Network for Safe Communities. *Police Leaders Acknowledge Past Harm: Examples*, <https://nnscommunities.org/guides/police-leaders-acknowledge-past-harm-examples>.

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.

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