

# A Guide to More Effective Police—Community Relations Through Media, Personal Engagement, and Collaborative Events

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The landmark 2015 Presidential Task Force on 21st Century Policing clearly indicates that one of the most effective ways to reduce crime in communities large and small is by improving the relationship between police personnel and the populations that they serve. According to a Rand Corporation study, the average American citizen tends to feel that their local police are generally not friendly, rude, and overly authoritarian. This causes an abiding sense of disconnection, which adversely affects civilian willingness to inform local law enforcement about possible criminal activity, thereby negatively impacting the crime rates in that locality. The same Rand study asserted that by simply improving their communication style and finding ways to work together with local residents, those negative perceptions will be significantly reduced, which then leads to a corresponding decrease in crime. This paper further details these above-mentioned issues and provides accessible, simple, and effective solutions involving improvements in the manner in which law enforcement personnel communicate with their communities, as well as advancements in how the citizens and the cops can work together through a program of ongoing collaborations.

*Keywords:* community policing, collaborative events, improved communication, crime reduction

## Introduction

“Without trust between police and citizens, effective policing is impossible” (Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), 1994).

Are you aware that local sporting events, jack-o-lanterns, and Christmas music, along with the focused use of public messaging and the media, can lead to less crime and an improved sense of community well-being?

Picture a late summer Sunday out at the Everytown municipal ballfield—it’s the Constables versus the Dealership Gearheads for the local co-op league championship. Most of the town comes out for this game, as well as for the great B-B-Q extravaganza, which includes contributions from a dozen of the best eateries in town. Always one of the biggest events every summer, it is not just the families or friends of the players who show up. And those unable to make it to the game can watch it live-streamed on the web or catch the replay on YouTube or over the local public access TV channel. A few weeks later, the annual Halloween pumpkin carving competition takes place in the high school parking lot, sponsored by several area law enforcement agencies as part of their yearly youth safety awareness campaign. This fun-filled contest, with prizes donated by local

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merchants, along with all sorts of sweets and treats, is also an opportunity to set up instructive displays, and info tables with exhibits and handouts, and other material relevant to this good cause. Then, near Christmastime, it's the annual Cops & Kids choral program of holiday songs, usually one of the most well-attended concert performances of the year, with all the proceeds donated to a worthy aid organization selected by the community. Again, each one of these collaborative community events would also be live-streamed, and posted on the department's website, Facebook page, YouTube, over the public access TV channel, and so on.

As we will explore herein, research has revealed that the most effective sure-fire pathway to improving relations between law enforcement and the communities they serve is by creating collaborative events, coming together with a common purpose, and experiencing a shared sense of humanity (COPS, 2010). The same research also indicates that the specific collective activities hardly matter—cooperating, communicating, and joining together are the most important elements. The possibilities for collaborative events are virtually endless.

While these kinds of shared community activities are important, they represent just one component of an overarching process that also includes ongoing public messaging through various media, along with a more approachable and friendly style of interaction between law enforcement personnel than civilians generally experience, where officers are seen as being approachable, and sociable (Rand, 2011) even when it's not a special holiday or sporting event.

As will be explained further on, these various tactics, along with others explored here, have been proven to help create a greater sense of trust between local law enforcement agencies and the citizens they serve, which then leads to less crime (Reisig, 2007). It also leads to a more positive sense of community, which tends to improve the quality of life and well-being of everyone involved (Alpert, et al, 2001).

### **Community Policing Basics**

The foundational concepts for creating more positive police-community relations are based upon the essentials of Community Policing, which first generated nationally widespread interest in the aftermath of the racial riots that spread across the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s (COPS, 1994). In the years that followed, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) has refined and codified the basics of Community Policing, culminating with the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994, and the formation of the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), designated by the DOJ as the agency responsible for advancing the practice of Community Policing through distributing information and funding grants to every level of America's law enforcement. In the years since, the need for effective strategies for better police-community relations has never been more front and center (Norwood, 2020).

2015 marks a defining landmark in understanding and advancing police-community relations with the publication of "The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing Implementation Guide: Moving From Recommendations to Action". The task force was established by President Obama to build trust between citizens and their law enforcement, among other matters. Their final report provides a comprehensive accumulation of research revealing that various Community Policing procedures can unquestionably help reduce local crime rates by as much as 15%. The report also presents a wide range of policies and positive action steps that law enforcement agencies could undertake, in collaboration with their community members, to expand and support Community Policing (COPS, 2015).

As a kind of companion piece to the President’s Task Force report, “The Collaborative Toolkit for Community Organizations” is another one of COPS most useful contributions, offering a variety of innovative and effective step-by-step activities designed for citizens’ groups who want to help advance better police-community relations (USDOJ, n.d.). It’s fair to say that with just those two documents, any community could begin successfully establishing better police-community relations.

Culled from those and other relevant sources, what follows are some relatively simple and effective strategies for substantially enhancing police-community relations, through person-to-person contact and purposeful use of mass media, straightforward measures that can be employed by any law enforcement agency, no matter the size, cultural makeup, or location.

Lest there be any misunderstandings, it’s worth noting that before leaving office, President Trump signed an executive order calling for legislation that would enhance existing federal grant programs to help police agencies grow community engagement (Norwood, 2020), underscoring that Community Policing is not some kind of far-left, anti-police agenda, and has nothing to do with many of the so-called defunding or dismantling strategies targeting law enforcement.

### **Evidence-Based Policing**

Community Policing represents Evidence-Based Policing (EBP), which necessitates reconsidering long-standing attitudes toward traditional law enforcement tactics that may be prevalent but have no systematic evidence of effectiveness (Sherman, 1998). EBP requires that all agency policies and practices are proven to work and supported by substantial research. When conducted well and earnestly, Community Policing is measurably helpful in reducing crime and fostering better community relations (Bullock & Tilley, 2016).

In their report, the President’s Task Force recommendations covered these six topics:

- Building Trust and Legitimacy
- Policy and Oversight
- Technology and Social Media
- Community Policing and Crime Reduction
- Officer Training and Education
- Officer Safety and Wellness

The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing web page also includes links to videos capturing the various group discussions conducted by the task force members, a wide array of law enforcement, criminal justice, and public policy professionals, who gathered to delve into and contribute their expertise on these six topics. To understand the background, reasoning, and data supporting the report’s practical findings more fully, those who are interested can review these videos.

As mentioned previously, among the most dramatic findings was that numerous locations practicing Community Policing saw up to a 15% decrease in crime, which some may consider reason enough to adopt the practice, even beyond the improved goodwill, social cohesion, and quality of life that can also result from Community Policing.

The focus here will primarily be on the Task Force topics of Building Trust and Legitimacy, Technology and Social Media, along with the COPS topic of Collaborative Events.

That said, it is worthwhile to briefly touch upon the other Task Force topics insofar as they relate to more effective police-community relations. The Presidential Task Force research on Community Policing and Crime Reduction already mentioned, detailed one of its most important findings, that at all levels and jurisdictions, locations that adopt Community Policing see their average crime statistics reduced, often dramatically (COPS, 2015). Some of the reasons for this phenomenon will be discussed further on, as it relates to trust, fairness, and law enforcement personnel training, among the other topics, to be covered more fully here.

The subject of Policy and Oversight requires top local law enforcement executive personnel and their various jurisdictional lawmakers to get on the same page insofar as policing methods and procedures are concerned. For instance, certain “tough on crime” laws and mandates may impede a department’s efforts in implementing Community Policing (Johnson, 2017).

In addition, elected officials may not be the only civilians with some authority over law enforcement policy and oversight. Beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s, some communities across the US began to create civilian review boards to oversee police behavior (Center for Public Integrity, 2020) with an increase in the establishment of such boards across the country during the 1980s, including America’s top 50 urban areas. Currently, about 200 such civilian review groups of some kind exist across the country, which is considerably fewer than the almost 1,000 or so such boards in the late 1980s (Reasons, n.d.). There are voices pro and con, from the law enforcement and civilian camps, who hold widely divergent conclusions about the usefulness of such agencies, but currently, there is no standard for how to measure the effectiveness of police oversight by civilians, with such agencies varying considerably in their structure and mandates (NACOLE, 2016). One essential element of Community Policing is the need for well-defined, and transparent, departmental responses to officer misbehavior. Similarly, citizens should be well informed about the departmental standards required of every officer concerning their comportment and conduct, as this kind of general knowledge is a Community Policing must (UNODC, 2011).

Officer Safety and Wellness, as well as Officer Training and Education, are all intrinsic to a well-functioning Community Policing stratagem and deserve a much more expansive exploration on their own than space allows here. Briefly, the unique stresses of the job are known to take a toll, all too often dramatically so. In addition to group updates about the latest gear and tools of the trade, and effective responses to dangerous situations, officers should participate in regularly scheduled, comprehensive in-service training about self-care, and vicarious trauma, as well as undergo occasional mental and behavioral fitness evaluations. Inter-agency meetings concerning cooperation with and learning about significant civic and services organizations, in addition to relevant current location-specific crime trends, and other crucial current job-related subjects, should all be regularly covered (IACP, n.d.)

According to the DOJ’s publication, “Police-Community Relations Toolkit: Policing 101”, Community Policing training on average includes 11 hours of training on cultural diversity/human relations, eight hours on basic strategies, and eight hours on mediation skills/conflict management (US DOJ Community Relations Service, n.d.). In addition, a Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) survey found that relatively few of the recruit and in-service training hours dedicated to use-of-force issues involve training on de-escalating potential use-of-force situations (PERF, 2015). The lack of mental health crisis services across the U.S. has resulted in law enforcement officers serving as first responders to most crises. A Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) program is an innovative,

community-based approach to improve the outcomes of these encounters. Of the 18,000 or so law enforcement agencies across the US, less than 3,000 communities nationwide have any critical incident training (CIT) programs that create vital connections between law enforcement, mental health providers, hospital emergency services, and individuals with mental illness and their families (NAMI, 2022).

### **Building Trust and Legitimacy**

Building trust starts with effective person-to-person communication (Conley, 2015). Regardless of race, class, culture, or ethnicity, most law-abiding citizens generally only see police officers during a traffic stop, or when the officers are guarding something or someone, or during various official operations, or perhaps looking out from the inside of a patrol car—through dark glasses—seemingly distant, officious, and unfriendly (Rand, 2011).

Due to the nature of the work, police officers usually engage in a linear style of communication, by giving orders or commands. This type of interaction is effective in dynamic situations or circumstances where an officer needs to gain compliance immediately, but it also eliminates factors that make interactions more transactional two-way communication (Loving, 2014).

A 2011 Rand Corporation study illuminated many considerations that affect a community's sense of trust and rapport with its local police personnel. These included such elements as body language, tone of voice and communication delivery style, perceived attitudes, presence—or lack of—empathy and understanding, and other such factors. Following these findings, the Rand study concluded that some departments need to address the often distant, impersonal, demanding demeanor of their police officers. This study also found that one of the easiest and most positive changes that patrol officers can make to generate goodwill is to simply step out of the patrol vehicles, take a walk through commercial and residential neighborhoods, and engage directly with the civilians in their communities (Rand, 2011).

Very positive effects can happen with simple shifts in the tone of voice and content from rank-and-file officers. After some simple straightforward training, discussed in more detail later, law enforcement personnel can learn the basics of active listening and how to employ a more generally affable tone when conversing with the public. According to numerous studies, except for situations that require authoritative commands, citizens tend to hold more positive attitudes toward officers whose demeanor is friendly and conversational, thereby promoting increased citizen satisfaction in their interactions with police, which then leads to more civilian cooperation, a vital element in reducing crime, especially as people on the street often know more about what's going on in their neighborhood than law enforcement and will tend to avoid sharing that knowledge with officers they see as unfriendly (Johnson, 2016).

Active listening is a way of hearing and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding, as well as an essential first step to defusing tense situations and solving potential problems (Milofsky, n.d.). Active listening works for both parties in the conversation. It benefits the person speaking by helping to ensure that they are being heard, but it also benefits the listener by learning how to put distractions and preemptive judgments aside. Here are some examples of statements that officers could use to invite active listening:

“Let me see if I’m understanding you correctly...”

“So, what you’re saying is...”

“Could you tell me a little more about that?”

“I’m sorry that you’re going through that. How can I help?”

Sometimes simply restating what someone else has said, and maintaining eye contact with a friendly disposition can go a long way toward defusing an unnecessarily tense situation (Loving, 2014).

When looking to create a sense of trust and legitimacy, the evidence shows that an officer’s demeanor is very important, and a friendly, conversational tone helps citizens feel more trusting. It starts with considering how one communicates with the people they know -- relatives, close friends, acquaintances -- and presenting the same kind of attitude, posture, and tone of voice, not at all like the officious armed warrior who seems ever wary of strangers (Milofsky, n.d.).

### **Collaborative Events**

Research indicates that there may be some modest improvements in relations between police and minority communities through increased diversity in recruitment, and with programs like multicultural sensitivity and implicit bias training. However, by far the most well documented, evidence-based successes indicate that direct collaborations between police departments and local groups are the most reliable and effective way to improve relations between police and minority communities, providing the most durable, lasting, and positive results. Any type of collaboration—neighborhood watch, inter-agency sporting events, street fairs, citizen review boards, etc.—markedly improves police-community relations (McC Campbell, 2014).

The National Night Out, a widely observed annual mid-summer community-oriented event across the USA, provides an excellent opportunity to initiate ongoing collaborations between a local law enforcement agency and its community. Administered by the National Association of Town Watch (NATW), the National Night Out was launched in 1984 by the US DOJ’s Bureau of Justice Assistance and was held in 400 communities involving 2.5 million people. It has since expanded to over 9,500 communities with some 32 million participating (NATW, n.d.). This program strengthens partnerships between communities and their police through a wide variety of activities within a festive atmosphere, including food stalls, water balloon toss competitions, face painting, tug-of-war contests, scavenger hunts, and so on (PlanIt Police, 2017).

National Night Out is a perfect way to kick off a progression of cooperative ventures between law enforcement and the public going forward—but if that single once-a-year festival is the only collaborative event that the police and the citizens take on, it would not be nearly enough to support a successful Community Policing program, which would require numerous ongoing cooperative ventures large and small.

Important additional long-term collaborations would include regular sit-down meetings, one or two per month, between law enforcement personnel and representatives of various civic organizations, such as the Rotary, Lions, downtown merchants’ associations, minority advocacy groups, interfaith alliances, parent-teacher organizations, and so on (COPS, 2014). Such meetings help promote regular and dependable connectivity between the department and the civilians, while also providing an exchange of more information about comings and goings in the community that law enforcement may not otherwise know about, including burgeoning challenges, such as newly identified trends in criminal behavior, novel illegal substances showing up, or dangerous newcomers (McC Campbell, 2014), which is a large part of how Community Policing helps reduce crime.

Similarly, regular ongoing community-wide meetings, perhaps a half dozen per year, in large gathering places such as gymnasiums, auditoriums, and outdoor venues, can provide opportunities to meet face-to-face with the general public. Police officials and other public personnel could discuss concerns about developing criminal trends, responses to local catastrophes and other community-wide issues, significant departmental policy changes, and so on. An open microphone would provide community participants the opportunity to ask questions or share comments as well, helping citizens to feel that they are being included and considered in the process (McC Campbell, 2014).

Such meetings could also be live streamed over a dedicated department website, and on Public Access TV, as well as posted to YouTube, as mentioned previously, and discussed in detail further on.

Many successful and effective police-community collaborations involve sports. The Police Athletic League (PAL) has long been known to foster positive community relations, especially with the younger populace (COPS, 2020). Many communities host inter-agency competitions on the baseball field, hockey rink, basketball court, and so on—law enforcement personnel against other public agencies and civilian groups—firefighters, school teachers, fraternal orders, etc. (UNODC, n.d.). Golf shoot-outs, bowling tournaments, swim meets, track and field events. The possibilities are endless (MacIntosh, 2017).

Music shows up around the world as another successful way that communities have joined with their local law enforcement (Oakdale Leader, 2022; Guilfoil, 2021). From choral collaborations during Christmas and other seasonal concerts, to bluegrass, country, and rock'n'roll jam sessions, hip-hop events, drum circles, talent showcases, and full-out festivals, few things can bring people together quite like music (Scottish Police & Community Choir, 2021; Maslov, 2019).

In 2017, a Carnegie Hall ensemble group in NYC, Decoda, launched a musical collaboration between young people and cops in the wake of community protests and targeted shootings of police. The mission was to start a dialogue and after weeks of collaborating and performing together both the officers and the students felt that they could bring what they've learned back to their communities, and hopefully change some perspectives (Duncan, 2017).

### **Technology and Social Media**

The current state of communication technology provides endless opportunities for police agencies to maintain a media presence, which is instrumental for successful Community Policing and offers far more engagement than just an occasional press release or critical incident report (COPS, 2015).

The internet alone offers the prospect of ongoing communication with the public through mass emails, web pages, blogs, podcasts, live-streaming videos, and a wide array of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and so on. Add to that traditional broadcast platforms like radio and TV, print media, and live events.

For effective Community Policing, handling the press, social media, and other communication technology, as well as public relations, requires a Public Information Officer (PIO), someone who can oversee, coordinate, and help generate whatever messages are to be disseminated to the public, as well as to determine the most effective means to get it all out there. Among their most important duties, the PIO is responsible for the release of incident-related information involving important crimes and evolving situations, in addition to regular ongoing public relations (Roberts, 2019).

Although there are approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the US (Kershner, 2020), according to the authoritative career site Zippia, there are only about 1,300 PIO's (Zippia, 2021). Some jurisdictions, especially in localities with agencies that receive funding from the US Department of Homeland Security, require that a PIO be on the staff, especially as the point person who is designated to report on critical incidents. However, it seems that most law enforcement agencies have decided a PIO is not necessary, for whatever reasons. If one of those reasons is budget constraints, the DOJ's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services regularly awards grants to hire Community Policing professionals, such as PIOs. COPS also funds innovative policing approaches, especially related to Community Policing, providing training and technical assistance to community members, local government leaders, and all levels of law enforcement (COPS, 2014).

The PIO may be a hands-on person with a media or internet background adept at handling most of the communication channels, or someone who is able to collaborate with people who have more expertise in handling equipment, pushing the buttons, or designing apps.

Many agencies have developed web pages dedicated to presenting up-to-date information on everything from local crime stats to departmental promotions to upcoming community-police collaborations. The city of San Diego's police department is an exemplary example and can be viewed at <https://www.sandiego.gov/police>. Internet presence can also be enhanced by posting relevant content through social media connections such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other popular platforms, in addition to presenting more in-depth information through podcasts. Live streaming on video is also available, which is detailed further on.

Two of the most available and generally underused media outlets are local radio and TV news, and PEG Television, also known as Community Access TV. There are over 15,000 commercial radio stations operating in the US, as well as some 1,500 Low Powered FM (LPFM) community-based radio stations (Vogt, 2016). There are also over 5,000 Public, Educational, and Governmental, or PEG, access TV channels across America (FCC, n.d.).

Local radio and TV newsrooms are always hungry for material to use on air. Utilizing radio to consistently communicate with the community can be as simple as issuing regular press releases on issues of interest, whether it be about newsworthy law enforcement stories, or public events related to upcoming community-police collaborations, or interesting developments within the agency (Zercoe, 2015).

Local TV news is especially useful for announcing or promoting significant community-police-related events, as well as having LE officials appear as guests related to evolving events or critical incidents. While local television news programming may have shed some of its audience over the past decade, it still garners more viewers on average than cable and network news programs (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Community Access or PEG TV, not to be confused with Public Television, is a non-for-profit nationwide system of channels mandated by federal law to be available free of charge, and can be utilized by police agencies in a wide variety of ways, from appearing as a guest on an already existing program to developing and producing original programs, which is not as complicated as it may seem at first (FCC, 2015).

The P in PEG is for Public Access, which provides a free outlet for local citizens to create and distribute not-for-profit TV programming to the community, whether it be a single show, or an ongoing series, through pre-recorded videos, or live events. The types of programming shown on a community access channel vary by station.



The E in PEG is for Educational-access television, set aside for educational departments and organizations within the locality. Educational-access television channels may be associated with specific educational institutions, school districts, or even private organizations that are contracted to operate the educational-access television channel for the city ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public-access\\_television#cite\\_ref-13](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public-access_television#cite_ref-13)).

The G stands for Government-Access Television (GATV), a resource used by many governmental agencies to address developing local issues, present live legislative meetings, election programming, local emergency announcements, and so on.

In some community surveys, PEG access TV frequently fares as well or better in viewership compared to its commercial cable and network counterparts and frequently receives a 1% to 2% viewership share as compared with premium pay television and hundreds of cable channels that receive far less (American Community Television, n.d.).

### Conclusions

Following these simple guidelines to develop more effective police-community relations in jurisdictions of any size or cultural complexity will help significantly prevent and reduce crime. Such an undertaking requires active listening and a generally sociable communication style from local law enforcement personnel. It will also require regular, ongoing meetings and direct engagement between the police and a wide variety of community organizations. There should also be numerous different types of collaborations planned throughout the year between the local law enforcement agencies and the citizenry, through various activities such as sports, PEG-TV productions, internet/social media presentations, musical partnerships, and seasonal events, as exemplified by the National Night Out. Funding, guidance, and complete information to launch such an endeavor is available through the Community Oriented Policing Services, and details can be acquired through the Final Report of the Presidential Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

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