COMMUNITY-POLICE RELATIONS

Example Adult Dialogue
Facilitator, law enforcement, and community organizers introduce themselves and summarize overall aim of the dialogue. For example, “Now we’d like to tell you why we are engaged in this work. In recent years, we’ve seen many examples of tension between police and the communities they serve. Importantly, events that happen elsewhere can also affect and inform local community-police relations. We’re doing this exercise to help community members and police better communicate their expectations.” It also helps participants to think about “what if something happened here that is similar to what we’re seeing nationally?” “Would we be prepared?” “Would we know how to respond?” “How should we respond?”

Invite everyone else to introduce themselves: “Please state your name, organization (if applicable), and your motivation for participating in this exercise.”
Using a Dialogue for Community-Police Relations

• “Community-police” relations actually involve many parties.
• But many communities have difficulty bringing key stakeholders together.
• All sides may have a hard time seeing others’ perspectives.
• Challenge: How to set aside competitive relationships to allow for an open dialogue?
• Dialogue offers [close to] a firsthand experience.
• Dialogue removes burdens on participants to
  – make firm commitments
  – maneuver politically
  – compete for scarce resources.
How does this dialogue work?

• Describe a hypothetical community and background issues related to community-police relations
• Present three scenarios that build on each other (crises, breaking news)
• Participants reflect at each stage of the exercise
• At the end, evaluate the dialogue overall, and identify and assign action items

Set Stage and Ground Rules
Introduce Community, Community-Police Issues
Unfolding/Breaking News
Debriefing/Self-Evaluation
Overall Evaluation Identify and Assign Action Items

Repeat for 2–3 scenarios
Short-Term Goals of the Community-Police Dialogue

**IDENTIFY**
gaps or areas of weakness in police-community relations

**DEVELOP**
connections and communication between police, community, government, and community-based organizations

Long-Term Goals of the Community-Police Dialogue

**ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION**
between participants that continues after the exercise is over

**BUILD A CULTURE OF TRUST**
between the community and the police
Before we get started, a couple of research procedures

Informed consent

In-progress and post-dialogue surveys

Read consent form.
Direct participants to surveys in their packet.
Discussion Ground Rules

- Everyone in the room is equally qualified to participate in the dialogue exercise.
- Any existing power differentials in your outside roles do not exist in this room.
- Everyone’s perspective is valued and should be respected during this discussion.
- Do not interrupt one another and do not monopolize the discussion.
- No single individual has all the answers. There is no “right” answer. We are here to listen and learn from one another.
- If you feel yourself getting upset, try to think about your real-world role from a disconnected or outsider’s perspective. Police officers, no one here is telling you how to do your job. Community members, no one here is telling you that your experience is wrong.
- It is okay to discuss things that were said during the dialogue, but everyone’s comments should remain confidential. Do not attribute comments (good or bad) to any participants after the dialogue is over.
Scenario Considerations

- No scenario is a perfect reflection of reality, which is intentional. No single scenario will address all components of an issue, but you should try to stick to only the issues present in the scenario.
- Some of the scenarios might be difficult to discuss or very personal to you (i.e., you've experienced it). If the scenario is too difficult for you, please feel free to take a break and come back to the group when you're ready.
- Try to pinpoint the key issues identified in the scenario and discuss them with the group.
- If you have questions about the scenario, ask the facilitator for clarification.
We’ll start by describing the setting of this hypothetical community, and some of the things that are happening there. Although it’s hypothetical, you’ll still be considering your own reactions as if this was happening here in [name of community].
In this hypothetical scenario, in April, there is increased attention to local policing because of various national events.
In addition, in this hypothetical community, the demographics of the police department are not reflective of the demographics of the community in some areas. Most residents are members of racial/ethnic minority groups.
In response to national events, community members begin to protest issues with policing, which also highlights some of the local tensions between the community and police.
Worried about conflict with the community, officers initially begin to pull back from their usual policing activities in some high-crime neighborhoods.
So that’s the setting we’re entering. Next, we’ll present three hypothetical scenarios for you to consider. As we show you these scenarios, consider some of these questions to yourself, and talk about them in your groups. Feel free to jot down notes during the review of each scenario using the notepads on your tables. After each scenario, you will break into small groups to discuss your perspectives using the discussion questions that are in your packets, then you will come back to the larger group to share your views. At the end, we’ll summarize what we’ve learned and try to find some potential action items that could be next steps for the community and police in [name of precinct] to pursue together.

Facilitator might mention how part of this is communicating our values—what’s most important to us. For some it might be safety, for others it might be fairness or equality (e.g., voice, respect, transparency, and so on).
First Scenario

"Long Beach skyline from water taxi" by Steve Devol (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)
In the community we just described, violent crime started to increase in June – a few months after the beginning of the rise in national attention to policing and local protests.
In response to the rise in violent crime, the police start making more stops, searches, and arrests. Often, these stops are for minor offenses, such as expired vehicle registration, jaywalking, or riding a bike on the sidewalk.
Community members begin expressing frustration over what they perceive to be overpolicing, use of aggressive tactics, and racially biased behavior.
The chief of police in this community feels that the tactics used by the police are necessary to reduce violence, and he denies that bias is the basis for these actions. However, he makes a commitment to participate in an external review.
Simultaneously, the police express concerns about low morale among officers.

So, from this set of evolving circumstances in this scenario, what is your reaction? In summary, in response to violent crime increasing, the police appear to have become more aggressive in enforcement activity, especially for minor infractions. The community has perceived this behavior as harassment and as biased policing. This has led to some small protests in response, and the chief of police has defended the officers’ actions but has also committed to an external review. Police officers, however, feel like they are under undue scrutiny, and this perception contributes to low morale.
SCENARIO 1
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

General
• Think about how you would react to the scenario. What is most important to you? Who would you talk to? What would you want to happen next?

Scenario 1
• What do you think about the police department’s response to rising violent crime? What are your thoughts on stops for low-level offenses? Do you think the police chief is doing enough to address potential community concerns? What is your take on the officers being discouraged by the community’s reactions?

• What are some things you think are critical for the police and community members to know about each other’s perceptions of this scenario?

Possible prompts:
What do you think about the police department’s response to rising violent crime? What are your thoughts on stops for low-level offenses? Do you think the police chief is doing enough to address potential community concerns? What is your take on the officers being discouraged by the community’s reaction?
Second Scenario
OK, now it’s August in this same community. There are a number of high-profile shootings committed by rival groups that further unsettle the community.
The police chief asks the community to help with investigations of the shootings in the area, but the community is reluctant to work with the police because of mistrust and fear.
Community members demand a meeting with the police to discuss their safety concerns.
Then, an officer has an encounter with a community resident who suffers from mental illness. During the encounter, the resident is injured by the officer’s use of force. Tension between the police and the community continues to increase as a result of this incident.
Now we’d like you to discuss this scenario. Consider the roles of the police and the community in building community safety. What things should each be doing and how should they be working together? How can they build trust? Also consider what information is necessary for the police and community members to work together.

### General
- Think about how you would react to the scenario. What is most important to you? Who would you talk to? What would you want to happen next?

### Scenario 2
- Consider the roles of the police and the community in building community safety. What things should each be doing and how should they be working together? How can they build trust?
- What does the police chief’s request for help from the community mean to you? How would you respond?
Third Scenario
About a month after the second scenario, a flash point event occurs. An officer is involved in a shooting during which the officer’s body-worn camera was turned off. The community resident who was injured had been stopped for a low-level offense.
The police chief convenes a series of town hall meetings to connect with the community, but he also delays participation in the external review that we discussed in scenario 1.
Then, media coverage of policing in this community begins to highlight issues with overpolicing—giving community members another platform to have their issues heard.
However, there is a leak of text messages that show officers are continuing to engage in frequent stops of community members. In addition, officers describe their actions as “hunting” or “fishing” during police stops.
OK, to recap, this scenario starts with a major incident that resulted from a low-level infraction. We also see that although the community has some additional outlets to express concerns (i.e., town hall meetings, social media), officers are still prioritizing low-level stops and searches as a means of targeting some community members. What does this say about how well community concerns are being addressed? Should community concerns inform police practice? If so, how should this be done?
Now we would like to wrap up by discussing what we’ve learned from this exercise and how this group can continue to work together to address any concerns in the community.

For Discussion

• Are there topics that weren’t discussed or addressed that should have been?
• What other insights or topics were raised?
• Did you identify areas where your community’s or police response needs to be strengthened?
• What needs to be done next by this group in your community?
About This Resource

This file contains supplementary material to the RAND publication *A Toolkit for Community-Police Dialogue*, by Dionne Barnes-Proby, Samuel Peterson, Alexandra Mendoza-Graf, Pierce Holmes, Danielle Sobol, Nipher Malika, Meagan Cahill, TL-A615-1, 2023 (available at www.rand.org/t/TLA615-1). This project was funded by both the Lenzner-Coleman Challenge Fund for Criminal Justice research and the American Arbitration Association-International Centre for Dispute Resolution Foundation®, which focuses on collaborative and community approaches to dispute resolution, as well as the use of alternative dispute resolution that is tailored to the conflict.

Justice Policy Program

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