



Overview Beginning with its work in bringing communities and police together to shut down drug markets, the National Network for Safe Communities has been both exploring and applying processes of police-community reconciliation. This work involves law enforcement and communities directly engaging with one another in order to address past and present harms, air grievances, and address narratives that keep both sides from moving toward their shared goal of improving public safety. When these issues are addressed openly, new understandings emerge, and a profound transformation in police-community relations becomes possible. Respect, collaboration, and effective working relationships between police and the communities they serve are central to both community safety and effective policing.

Competing narratives and historical context

The reconciliation process recognizes the real American history of abusive law enforcement practices toward minority communities, beginning with slavery. It also respects—without endorsing—the damaging narratives each side has about the other. Many people in minority communities affected by high levels of violence and serious crime genuinely believe that police use drug laws and other enforcement as a means to oppress them. Their alienation is fueled by the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and other legal oppression of minorities; high levels of intrusive police tactics like arrest and stop-and-frisk; and disrespectful behavior by police. When communities are furious with the police, they are not inclined to work with the authorities or speak out publicly against violence and crime. Serious offenders may wrongly believe that their own communities tolerate or even support their behavior.

Conversely, some in law enforcement genuinely believe that troubled minority communities are broadly tolerant of—and even complicit in—crime and violence. In fact, both research and national field experience clearly show that high-crime minority communities are the least tolerant of crime and disorder,¹ and that in the most apparently dangerous communities the vast majority of people do not behave violently.² However, where police believe otherwise, they are more inclined to treat entire communities as criminal and employ aggressive and intrusive tactics.



Many in the African-American community feel that most cops are dishonest and out to get them, that the CIA is behind the drug epidemic, and it's all a conspiracy to lock up more and more African-American men. On the other hand, the cops will say the community is complicit, that nobody cares, no one is raising their kids, everybody is living off of drug money, and the only thing we can do is occupy them.³

David Kennedy, Director, National Network for Safe Communities

Acknowledgements, truth-telling, and common ground

The reconciliation process typically includes frank acknowledgements, and sometimes apologies, from law enforcement about how traditional enforcement has been both ineffective and damaging, and an assurance that they intend to do better. The process also often addresses the way communities have failed to stand up against local criminal activity and includes discussion about how to work together to develop a safer community. This process has proven powerful. It can be an uncomfortable step, but it is often necessary for forming a true partnership and rebuilding trust.

The aim of reconciliation is that communities and law enforcement come to see that:

- ▶ 1. They misunderstand each other in important ways.
- ▶ 2. Both have been contributing to harms neither desires.
- ▶ 3. In crucial areas, both want fundamentally the same things.
- ▶ 4. There is an immediate opportunity for partnership that can concretely benefit both the community and the authorities they serve.

The process allows strong community standards to emerge and law enforcement to step back. These conversations begin to uncover common ground, and disaffected communities usually feel strengthened to articulate norms against violence and crime, in part because they are less angry with law enforcement and are eager to try a new approach.⁴ As a result of this process, law enforcement gains legitimacy in the eyes of the community, the community is freed to set its own public safety standards, and enforcement actions can be kept to a minimum.⁵ So far applied mainly at the neighborhood level, the National Network is actively exploring ways that reconciliation can be expanded. Fostering the reconciliation process is also a core goal of the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, a project of the U.S. Department of Justice led by the National Network.



I understand the historical divide between police and communities of color—it's rooted in the history of this country. The most visible arm of government is a police force, and the institutionalized governmental programs that promoted racist policies that were enforced by police departments in this country are part of the African-American history in this country. And we have to recognize it because recognition is the first step toward finding a cure for what is ailing us. Over the years we've actually done a lot of things wrong and I'm willing to admit that.⁶

Garry McCarthy, Superintendent, Chicago Police Department

The National Network for Safe Communities supports cities advancing proven strategies to reduce violence, minimize arrest and incarceration, and strengthen relationships between law enforcement and distressed communities.

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¹ Sampson, R. J., & Bartusch, D. J. (1998). Legal Cynicism and (Subcultural?) Tolerance of Deviance: The Neighborhood Context of Racial Differences. *Law and Society Review*, 32, 777-804.

² Papachristos, A. V. (2009). Murder by Structure: Dominance Relations and the Social Structure of Gang Homicide. *American Journal of Sociology*, 115(1), 74-128; Papachristos, A. V., Meares, T. L., & Fagan, J. (2007). Attention Felons: Evaluation Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago. *Journal of Empirical Studies*, 4(2), 223-272.

³ Quotation taken from the executive session hosted by the COPS Office and National Network in Washington D.C. on January 11, 2012.

⁴ Frabutt, J. M., Hefner, M. K., Harvey, L. K., Di Luca, K. L., & Shelton, T. L. (2009). Key community stakeholders in a police-community partnership to eliminate street-drug markets: Roles, engagement, and assessment of the strategy. *Crime, Punishment, and the Law: An International Journal*, 2(1-2), 55-70.

⁵ Meares, T. L. (2009). The Legitimacy of Police Among Young African-American Men. *Marquette Law Review*, 92 (4), 651-666.

⁶ Wildeboer, R. (2011, Aug 15). Interview: Garry McCarthy on the future of the Chicago Police Department. *WBEZ Chicago*. <http://www.wbez.org/story/interview-garry-mccarthy-future-chicago-police-department-90445>.