

Case study: Applying Procedural Justice to Youth Engagements with School Resource Officers

As part of its youth intervention, the Fort Worth Police Department hosted a peer exchange on a training curriculum developed by its procedural justice trainers, to help School Resource Officers build trust with youth.

Introduction to Fort Worth's Youth Intervention

Of the six focus communities identified for support in this grant—youth, LGBTQIA individuals, victim-survivors of both domestic and sexual violence, Latinx individuals and immigrants, and Native Americans—the [National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice](#) (National Initiative) has devoted particular attention to the development of its youth intervention. It has worked closely with each site to support interventions based in research on youth behavior, grounded in the pillars of reconciliation and procedural justice, and that provide a foundation for healthy youth development and stronger police-youth engagement. This priority reflects the project's goal to address disproportionate levels of police-youth contact within communities of color, and mitigate the harm, mistrust, and poor perceptions of legitimacy that this can perpetuate.

A well-developed youth intervention allows law enforcement in each site to take advantage of a unique opportunity for early public safety intervention and generational trust building with youth, both of which can ultimately reduce violence and strengthen police-community relations in the long term. Moreover, it offers sites an opportunity to expand the theoretical and practical applications of procedural justice, and leverage the broader resources of their police departments—for example School Resource Officers (SROs)—to institutionalize and champion this work.

Procedural Justice Trainers at the Fort Worth Police Department (FWPD) spent the first half of 2018 developing a unique approach to do just that: a curriculum and training for SROs called “Youth Engagement and Conversations.” Based on the city's work on the National Initiative in reconciliation and procedural justice, the curriculum and training encourage SROs to establish authentic, meaningful connections and build trust with a select group of young people at their schools, through a series of conversations throughout the school year. They also equip SROs with guidance and best practices for sustaining these conversations.

In July 2018, the FWPD PJ team of Lieutenant Buck Wheeler, Officer Demetra Bradley, and Officer Stephen Srein launched the first of two trainings on their new curriculum. When other PJ trainers across the pilot sites heard of it, they expressed significant interest in learning more and potentially seeing the training firsthand.

Summary of the Fort Worth Peer Exchange

To that end, and in furtherance of Fort Worth's youth intervention, the National Initiative convened a peer exchange with three pilot sites in Fort Worth, TX from August 8-9, 2018, titled “Youth Engagement, Procedural Justice, and School Resource Officers”. The primary goal was for participants to observe or participate in the FWPD's second Youth Engagements and Conversations training. By hosting the peer exchange, Fort Worth not only allowed other law enforcement partners to observe this training firsthand; they also helped the group contextualize these efforts in the broader dynamics of the FWPD SRO Unit and community engagement work.

The National Initiative police departments attending this peer exchange—Birmingham, Fort Worth, and Minneapolis—were selected as sites where School Resource Officer programs were administered directly

by the cities' police departments, and could therefore be integrated more easily into the departments' procedural justice reforms and even held accountable for implementation. For this same reason, as well as his insight leading both procedural justice training in New York State and the SRO Division in his department, Lieutenant Anthony Geraci from the Albany Police Department was also invited to participate. Police representatives included a mix of SROs, National Initiative site liaisons, and procedural justice trainers – sworn and civilian – at levels of rank ranging from Officer to Assistant Chief. Through a series of meetings with local community partners, conversations between PJ trainers and SROs across sites, and a full day training and debrief, this peer exchange highlighted Fort Worth's novel approach to police-youth trust building and connected it to other efforts across the sites.

The two-day peer exchange focused on the conceptualizing of procedural justice in youth engagement and observing the Youth Engagements and Conversations training, alongside FWPD SROs. Day One began with law enforcement participants sharing an overview of youth initiatives in their departments, and defining what procedural justice meant to them in the context of this work. They then met with SRO leadership from FWPD to discuss best practices for SROs, innovations that promote procedural justice, and potential challenges of the SRO role. Dr. Angela Mitchell, a local community-based youth mentor, helped participants identify key elements within a police department to achieve success for youth mentoring. Participants also had the opportunity to hear directly from a recent high school graduate, Eboney Singleton, who had served on the FWPD'S Chief's Advisory Board (CAB), who shared her experiences dealing with SROs in schools, suggestions for improvement, and her thoughts on what young people would like to see from law enforcement in general.

Day Two began with FWPD PJ trainers providing a refresher of procedural justice and implicit bias training, then shifted to an overview of youth behavior and culture to help trainees understand how to better engage with youth. The rest of the day was centered around the program's reconciliation-based approach to conversations with youth: where SROs acknowledge harm that youth have experienced; empower youth to speak up about their questions, views, and concerns with law enforcement; and explain the concepts and importance of procedural justice and addressing implicit bias. The trainers also shared general tips for getting youth to open up during these conversations, such as sharing a personal fact or anecdote, maintaining open body language, and using icebreakers.

Conversations between participants over the two days yielded myriad insights on subjects ranging from police department administration, to PJ training and implementation, to community-based youth mentoring. However, this case study will focus on specific applications of procedural justice to youth engagement, and how PJ can help law enforcement successfully build trust with youth.

Applications of Procedural Justice to Youth Engagement for SROs

Perhaps the most widely applicable set of insights from the Fort Worth peer exchange was about how to define procedural justice for law enforcement in the context of youth engagement, and outline practical applications. For the most part, participants asserted that the concept of procedural justice is universal and should be applied as such to members of the community regardless of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc. For example, an officer demonstrating procedural justice during the traffic stop of a teenager should not look fundamentally different from the traffic stop of an adult. However, the differences lay in promoting department practices and activities that best expand applications of procedural justice, with specific considerations for youth. For example, as Site Liaison Glenn Burt of the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) commented, giving voice to young people via a social media platform like Reddit's "Ask me Anything" might be more relevant than a mailed invitation to a listening session at a local church.

Key Takeaways: Action items

Goals:

- Improve perceptions of police legitimacy among youth
- Build strong mentoring relationships with youth
- Understand youth-specific applications of procedural justice

Actions:

- Add a curriculum and training for SROs including:
 - Procedural justice training
 - Implicit bias/tactical perceptions training
 - Youth behavior and culture
- During program design, solicit direct feedback from current or recent students on what young people would like to see from SROs and law enforcement
- Empowering youth voice
 - SROs should hold a series of conversations to establish authentic connections and build trust with a select group of young people
 - Be aware that the voices of young people are often dismissed in public spaces
 - It may take several sessions with the same group before youth become comfortable opening up
 - Allowing youth to engage officers in off-topic conversations can help build the trust required for more difficult subjects
 - Consider assistance from a community member trained in facilitation
- Demonstrating neutrality
 - Offer specific resources to support young people who may be further marginalized by race, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression
- Treating youth with respect
 - Be patient: young people's behavior, judgment, and temperament are inherently less developed than that of adults
 - Maintain a respectful attitude toward youth, even if they are not behaving respectfully or calmly
- Demonstrating trustworthiness
 - Clarify the SRO role with all students, parents, school faculty and administration
 - Give SROs a platform to engage with students about their role
 - SROs should explain enforcement actions to students
 - School faculty and administration should not use SROs to enforce conduct rules
 - When SROs enforce rules unrelated to safety, students can become unnecessarily involved in the criminal justice system, to their long-term detriment
 - This pattern weakens trust in SROs and the criminal justice system, and weakens perceptions of their legitimacy

As all participants understood well, the four central tenets of procedural justice are voice, respect, neutrality, and trustworthiness. While participants did raise the importance of demonstrating neutrality towards youth, specifically by actively addressing and lessening the impact of implicit biases related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities, the most salient applications of procedural justice centered on empowering youth voice, demonstrating neutrality, treating young people with respect, and demonstrating trustworthiness.

Empowering youth voice

A critical theme of the Youth Engagements and Conversations training was that by encouraging young people to speak up to law enforcement—on everything from superficial questions about police gadgets to personal and troubling experiences with officers—law enforcement can establish a relationship with youth and eventually gain their trust. While this principle applies to all community members, the voices of young people are often especially dismissed in public spaces compared to adults, due to their relative youth, inexperience, and lack of resources. Their voices may be even further marginalized along lines of race, class, gender, immigration status, and sexual orientation—which is especially important to note considering that the current generation of youth, known as “Generation Z,” is the most racially diverse to date.¹ Therefore, the opportunity to build trust through empowering voice is significant.

Participants suggested several platforms for SROs and other law enforcement to empower youth voice. One, of course, was the Fort Worth Youth Engagements and Conversations, which involve a series of three to six small listening sessions. Another similar opportunity was broader listening sessions between the police department and youth that are facilitated by a trained, trauma-informed community member instead of law enforcement, where police instead sit alongside youth as participants. Under the National Initiative framework, the goal of listening sessions is to acknowledge the harm that community members have historically faced at the hands of law enforcement, provide a forum for community members to speak up and share their thoughts, encourage empathetic listening and sharing amongst participants, and

¹ Wang, Hansi Lo. "Generation Z Is the Most Racially and Ethnically Diverse Yet." NPR. November 15, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/15/668106376/generation-z-is-the-most-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-yet>.

identify specific action items on which to circle back. To date, the FWPD has held several listening sessions or community engagements specifically with youth, with the support of their Community Liaison, Joycia “Sunshyne” Johnson.

Another idea raised was the importance of having youth representation on an Advisory Committee, similar to the CAB structure of the FWPD and the Stockton Police Department (SPD), was also praised for its success in elevating young voices. Indeed, Eboney, noted that she and her peers on the CAB appreciated the opportunity to speak up and be heard by adults in the room, and found the opportunity to have voice and demonstrate leadership in their community empowering—results that support healthy youth development.

Yet by their very nature, these types of platforms are restricted to a small group of students. In order to reach a much broader range of young voices, Eboney supported the idea of distributing anonymous surveys throughout schools to allow students to give feedback on the performance of their SROs, which should be used to inform SRO training and whether particularly low-rated SROs continue at that school. While survey completion would likely never reach 100 percent, collecting and reviewing surveys would show a good faith effort from the police department to ensure that students can make their voices heard, and that their voices matter.

Demonstrating neutrality

In order to reinforce this element of procedural justice, the FWPD trainers provided all training participants with a refresher of implicit bias and tactical perceptions training, known as “PJ 3”. The conceptual link of demonstrating neutrality by recognizing, addressing, and actively working to reduce implicit biases about race, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression, was familiar to everyone in the room, all of whom had already received PJ 3 training.

However, the peer exchange also raised a few questions about what neutrality actually looked like on school grounds. For one, while male SROs spoke warmly of the mentoring relationships they had developed with other male high school students, they acknowledged less comfort building relationships with young women. This was not about sexism or personal preference, but rather as one of them noted, “I can’t exactly give my phone number to a 16-year-old girl.” Still, officers recognized how such behavior, even when born out of caution and fear of impropriety, could lead to unfair experiences and perceptions of bias among young women in the schools. While having more female SROs was the participants’ preferred solution to this problem, they also identified another procedurally just and more immediate solution, which is sharing female-centered resources with young women identified as in need.

Treating youth with respect

Eboney’s candor about her experiences with her school’s SRO illustrated how youth may feel disrespected by law enforcement. In her example of an incident on campus, after which emotions were heightened, she reported an SRO being snappish and dismissive during questioning. This set students on edge, leading them to respond impulsively as teenagers may do in tense situations. Although tensions eventually cooled, the SRO’s initial attitude and continued escalation of the situation deterred the student from ever seeking that SRO out again for help.

Fortunately, Eboney had served on the FWPD CAB and thus had other positive interactions with law enforcement as reference points. Unfortunately, however, that is not the case for most young people, who may extrapolate one bad interaction with an SRO into a negative outlook towards all police. Therefore, it is essential for officers who engage with youth to not only be respectful, but also particularly patient with and understanding of young people’s behavior, judgment, and temperament, which are inherently less developed than that of an adult.

The FWPD PJ trainers reinforced this point during their training on the Youth Engagements and Conversations curriculum. They encouraged SROs to think about considerations that can potentially undermine respectful interactions with youth. Officer Srein noted, at times humorously through examples of many ill-fated viral YouTube challenges, the inherent immaturity of youth due to their brain development, and the challenges that this can create in an interaction. He implored officers to consider youth's brain development throughout an interaction and maintain their level of respect, even when faced with less-than-respectful behavior from young people.

Demonstrating trustworthiness

Of all the tenets of procedural justice, trustworthiness may have the greatest impact on police relationships with youth, and thus presents the greatest opportunity for improvement. Several participants admitted that they have heard both students and school administration express misunderstandings over the role of SROs, and acknowledged that this lack of transparency can make schools a breeding ground for confusion, mistrust, and resentment towards police. In recognition of this, the FWPD Youth Engagements and Conversations curriculum recommends that SROs introduce themselves and explain their role during the initial program conversation with their students.

Officer Richard Mason, an SRO from Birmingham, shared his tradition of hosting an activities-filled, school-wide event at the beginning of the school year—to introduce himself, explain his role, educate students about the law (e.g. stealing cell phones or texting naked pictures of underage students are felonies), and offer himself as a friend and resource. Because students felt able to trust him, he was able to build productive relationships throughout the campus with students who indeed sometimes reached out to him for help.

Eboney corroborated this view, expressing a desire for greater transparency from police that echoes similar calls from many other community members across the country. She pointed out the need for transparency especially around enforcement actions—both out of respect to the students' desire for information, and to halt potentially dangerous rumor mills that can spread negative views of SROs and police throughout the student body. In her example, an SRO's lack of explanation for using force against a pregnant teenager at her school poisoned the student body's views on that SRO. Law enforcement participants acknowledged that even if the use of force was legitimate, the SRO missed a major opportunity to explain her actions and therefore build trust. Increased transparency could also help address another issue raised by Lieutenant Wheeler: that lack of clarity and alignment on an SRO's role can exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline.

Studies show that the school-to-prison pipeline, described by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund as the “funneling of students out of school and into the streets and the juvenile correction system”² for minor disciplinary infractions, is often driven by school faculty and administration who improperly utilize³, or “weaponize” SROs to enforce conduct rules. As Lieutenant Wheeler noted, when an exasperated teacher calls in an SRO to enforce a “house rule” and the student continues refusing to comply, a simple disciplinary matter can quickly become criminal. Not only can this pattern have a detrimental impact on individual students' lives; it can also weaken trust and perceptions of police legitimacy among young people throughout the school.

Lieutenant Geraci joined Lieutenant Wheeler in lamenting this, and both they and Lieutenant Amy Rodriguez of the FWPD SRO Division emphasized the importance of telling school faculty and administration that SROs are not responsible for enforcing school conduct rules. Glenn and Sergeant

² Tyner, Artika R. “The Emergence of the School-to-Prison Pipeline.” American Bar Association. August 15, 2017. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/publications/gpsolo_ereport/2014/june_2014/the_emergence_of_the_school-to-prison_pipeline/.

³ Elias, Marilyn. “The School-to-Prison Pipeline.” Teaching Tolerance, Spring 2013. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2013/the-school-to-prison-pipeline>.

Catherine Michal, also of the MPD, spoke of having meetings between SROs, parents, and school faculty and administration before the start of the school year specifically to have this conversation. All participants agreed that by increasing transparency about their roles in the school, and specifically what kind of enforcement activities they will and will not do, SROs can dispel many fears and misconceptions about their role, demonstrate greater trustworthiness, and strengthen positive relationships with youth.

Considerations and Next Steps

Despite the many actionable insights gleaned from the peer exchange, the discussions also raised some questions. For one, SRO trust-building efforts present a unique law enforcement complication regarding jurisdiction. As Officer Zack Shivers, a PJ Trainer from Birmingham based in their Police Academy, pointed out, procedural justice must be embedded in department culture and practice in order to be credibly demonstrated by law enforcement throughout the community, including in schools. However, the city's government structure can have a tremendous impact on these efforts. While all four police departments participating in the peer exchange oversaw their SRO Divisions, not all of them directly controlled their SRO budgets—and this still does not address the National Initiative police departments outside the peer exchange, in Gary, Pittsburgh, and Stockton, where SROs are under the jurisdiction of the School Board, Sheriff's Department, or an entirely different agency. Such factors, which of course lie far beyond the reach of one police department's procedural justice work, can undermine that same department's efforts to hold their SROs accountable to procedurally just policing in schools, and hamper their ability to equip SROs with the resources (e.g. training, more female officers, etc.) to effectively build trust with youth.

Nonetheless, the participating departments felt encouraged in leaving the peer exchange with new tools, perspectives, and recommendations from their peers across the country: namely in how to empower youth voice, demonstrate neutrality, treat youth with respect, and demonstrate trustworthiness. These insights, inspired by Fort Worth's youth intervention and strengthened by the peer exchange, can now inform a deeper understanding of how procedural justice can help law enforcement build trust with young people.

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