

Case Study: Improving Police Service to Immigrant Communities in Pittsburgh

The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police has made it a priority to improve service to immigrant and refugee communities. In July 2018, they held a public event to increase awareness of these efforts.

Key Takeaways

Actions:

- Public outreach:
 - Make the department's unbiased policing policy publicly available
 - Hold community outreach meetings and disseminate department information in the languages of the communities served
 - Demonstrate to communities the training that officers receive in procedural justice/implicit bias
 - Make expectations clear: Let community members know what kind of service they should expect from police
 - Build empathy by creating opportunities for community members to get to know the police and engage in dialogues
 - Give immigrants and refugees voice: Listen to community members' concerns and use them to inform trainings and policy. Let community members know when action has been taken on their input.
 - Emphasize that this work is ongoing, and that community members are invited to participate in the relationship-building process

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has become home to tens of thousands of international immigrants and refugees. The county seat of Allegheny County [gained 22,588 residents](#) from international migration between 2010 and 2016 and has resettled [more than 5,000 refugees](#) since 2001. The wide array of cultures represented among these new arrivals—from Bhutanese to Congolese, Iraqis to Syrians—has raised the need for the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police to incorporate proactive techniques to connect with and create mutual understanding with these new communities. “Our ultimate goal is that members of the immigrant and refugee communities trust us and don’t hesitate to call us when they need our help,” says Chief of Police Scott Schubert.

As one of six pilot sites participating in the [National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice](#) (National Initiative), a U.S. Department of Justice grant launched in 2014, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police (PBP) has focused on three pillars—enhancing procedural

justice, reducing the impact of implicit bias, and fostering reconciliation. These pillars are “a big part of our philosophy” says Chief Schubert, “[W]e believe in the National Initiative and we continue to implement many of the policies and best practices.”

The three pillars are intended to strengthen police-community relationships across communities, but should also be implemented with special considerations for focus communities that may be uniquely marginalized along lines of race, ethnicity, religion, language barriers, and/or immigration status. The PBP has added information about working with immigrants and refugees to its implicit bias trainings. Its “Unbiased Policing Policy” now explicitly bars officers from using ethnic background, cultural group, or ability/inability to speak English as criteria for determining when or how to take enforcement action or provide police services.

Outreach and Collaboration

Training and policy alone cannot build police-community trust. Once the department’s internal work is underway, the next steps are to demonstrate that work to impacted communities, let them know what they should expect from officers, build interpersonal relationships, and invite them into the process.

Key Takeaways

Issue:

- An influx of immigrants with varied cultures and native languages has raised the need for the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police to incorporate proactive techniques to connect with, understand, and educate these new communities.
- Language barriers can deter immigrants from contacting police to request help, report crimes, or offer information.
- Immigrants might fear or mistrust law enforcement based on their experiences in other countries. Many refugees have suffered physical, historical, and/or psychological traumas. Often, that trauma is specifically rooted in the actions of police and government forces in their countries of origin.

Goals:

- For immigrants to see police officers as here to protect and serve them
- For immigrant and refugee communities to trust police, not hesitate to call when they need help

Actions:

- Within the police department:
 - Include immigrant- and refugee-specific information in internal procedural justice and implicit bias trainings.
 - Instruct officers who find themselves in a state that impedes their objective judgment to request that another officer assist or relieve their duty.
 - Provide easy access to interpretation services for first responders.
 - Institute an “unbiased policing” policy to bar officers from using race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, economic status, age, cultural group, or English-speaking ability as criteria for determining when or how to take enforcement action or provide police services.

To that end, on July 25, 2018, the PBP and the Pittsburgh Department of Public Safety partnered with the University of Pittsburgh’s Center on Race and Social Problems for the school’s Third Annual Summer Institute, titled “Understanding Implicit Bias—The Science of Justice.” The program convened law enforcement and citywide partners serving immigrants and refugees for a demonstration of PBP’s implicit bias training and wider conversation about trust building between law enforcement and immigrant populations.

Implicit Bias Training

Officer Jeff Upson, a trainer at the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police Training Academy, presented the Summer Institute’s participants—government officials, academics, social service workers, K-12 educators, and police officers—with an abridged version of the implicit bias course provided to Pittsburgh police officers. The course is based on the National Initiative’s PJ3 curriculum. He invited participants to let their guard down and view things from a different perspective both when engaging with his presentation, which featured snippets of TED Talks, photos illustrating bias, and accounts of his own battles with bias and stereotypes, and during their roundtable discussions.

The presentation focused on collaborative learning exercises that prompted participants to recognize their own biases and consider how to mitigate them. Officer Upson’s stated objectives included: helping participants understand the influence the psychological science of bias wields on behaviors in both universal and policing contexts; creating a shared language to bridge the divide between law enforcement and the communities they

serve; and, engaging in dialogues to build empathy and increase self-reflection.

Officer Upson informed participants that during training, officers are taught to be aware of factors that could increase their likelihood to unconsciously act on biases (or “fall into fast traps”), including being mentally taxed, in a bad mood, and multitasking. Officers who feel that they are at high risk of falling into a fast trap are instructed to request, as soon as reasonably possible, that another officer assist or temporarily relieve them of duty.

Creating a Shared Language

Through the City of Pittsburgh Public Safety department’s recently-created Multicultural Liaison Unit, all Pittsburgh police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and EMTs, are undergoing multicultural training to effectively address and support the public safety needs of residents with various cultural backgrounds and limited English proficiency. In addition, the Multicultural Liaison Unit provides a 24/7 interpreter line for first responders. The PBP has also placed a language access card in each patrol unit so that the number is readily available and officers can communicate to people who don’t speak English that they are contacting an interpreter.

“It can be a daunting thing to speak to a police officer who may not understand you,” Officer Upson said. As another consideration, he added, “[Y]ou might not want to contact police because you don’t trust police where you come from. We have to bridge that gap.”

Changing Perceptions of Police

Language is not the only barrier when working with refugee communities. As Officer Upson noted, many refugees have suffered physical, historical, and/or psychological traumas in their homelands. Often, that trauma is rooted in the actions of police and other government forces, which may lead to anxiety about interactions with law enforcement in the U.S. According to Upson, the words and phrases that refugees associate with police include “fear,” “power,” and, “corruption”.

“Experiences play a huge role in the way you think,” Upson said. “If your experience is one in which police are strong arms of the government and then you come to the U.S., you’re going to base your thinking on your past experience. We need to break down those walls and form that relationship [with immigrants and refugees], where they see that Pittsburgh police officers are here to protect and serve them.”

Officer Elvis Duratovic, who immigrated to the US in 1997, has never forgotten the poor treatment he received during a traffic stop in his birth country of Bosnia. He draws on that experience now in his career as a Pittsburgh police officer. “What we do leaves a lasting impression on people,” Officer Duratovic said. “I think personally, having experience from both perspectives as an immigrant and as an officer, the most valuable thing for immigrants and refugees is to educate them on the laws in the United States.”

A critical goal of law enforcement in Pittsburgh is to have their community members better understand these laws, as well as PBP policies and procedures that serve to protect community members of all backgrounds. Their “Unbiased Policing” policy explicitly prohibits officers from using race, ethnic background, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, age, cultural group, or an individual’s ability or inability to speak English as the criteria for determining when or how to take enforcement action or provide police services. Under the same policy, PBP officers are prohibited from arresting or detaining persons for the sole purpose of investigating their immigration status, and may not make an inquiry about person’s immigration status unless such an inquiry is necessary to an investigation involving criminal activity and they can justify why it is necessary in writing. PBP officers are not allowed to inquire about a victim’s or witness’ immigration status, and are instructed to encourage all victims and witnesses to report a crime regardless of their immigration status.

Reactions to the Summer Institute

During her lunchtime presentation at the Summer Institute, Leslie Aizenman, Director of [Refugee & Immigrant Services for the Jewish Family and Community Services](#) in Pittsburgh, underscored the need for more community education about the role of police. She also praised the dynamic nature of Officer Upson’s presentations, including his use of audience call-and-response, videos, and personal anecdotes, and said that it was clear the police were “not starting from scratch” in their programmatic offerings toward immigrants and refugees. However, Aizenman also pointed out that while insightful, the Summer Institute program had fewer immigrants in attendance than she would have liked. Service providers would need to convey the information they learned to more community members. Ultimately, Aizenman described the training, and the dialogue it sparked, as something to build upon.

Jeimy Ibarra, the Youth Community Outreach Coordinator at Casa San Jose, said she would like to see a demonstration of the implicit bias training, by community relations officers, at community meetings for non-English speakers. “I didn’t know [police officers] get all this implicit bias training,” said Ibarra, when asked

what she learned from the program. “Being able to share this information with the community, in their own language, would be one step closer to breaking down the barrier.”

Robert O. Motley, a Ph.D. candidate at Washington University in St. Louis, agreed that he would have liked to see more immigrants present at the Summer Institute, but expressed enthusiasm for the holistic, collaborative approach between police and service providers that he observed. “At first I didn’t think implicit bias training would have a lot of utility,” Motley admitted. “We’ve all lived in this society all of our lives. How could an eight-hour, one-day training get rid of [the biases we have]?” However, his viewpoint shifted markedly during the program. “The fact [that] Pittsburgh is at the forefront for implementing and scaling this implicit bias training to the next level speaks volumes for the region,” Motley said. He even noted that he would likely highlight the PBP in his dissertation as an example of a law enforcement agency actively addressing implicit bias and increasing police legitimacy among its citizens.

The Summer Institute provided police, immigrant advocates and service providers, and other community members an important trust-building opportunity, while also highlighting that still more trust-building work needs to occur. After the event, PBP Commander Eric Holmes acknowledged the ongoing nature of the work ahead: “It’s important to build trust one day at a time, one event at a time.”

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