

REPAIRING HEALTHY POLICE AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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Introduction:

The mistrust of the justice system and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) of underrepresented communities have had impact on the relationships with law enforcement. Life experiences throughout a child's life can lead to negative misconceptions of the police. For this project, we will explore the relationships between the community and police to analyze the effect of recruitment of culturally diverse police officers. Repairing the youth and community relationship with law enforcement can improve the cultural composition of police departments, specifically the New Haven Police Department and the Hamden Police Department located in Connecticut. Providing access to a platform for consistent conversation amongst minority communities could support positive communication and shared experience which may lead to a shift in the current adversarial feelings towards the police.

Description of the Problem:

Negative views, experiences and attitudes towards the police cause a barrier in a diverse police force recruitment in the New Haven and Hamden communities. Without the active presence of community members as police recruits it is challenging to develop a police force that is connected to the needs and culture of a community in order to protect and serve it from a collaborative space.

In their article titled, "Race and Worrying About Police Brutality: The Hidden Injuries of Minority Status in America," Graham et al. explore the discord and tension between the African American community and the institution of policing as a whole. As noted in the article, the physical effects of police brutality have been broadcast throughout mainstream media. However, there are underlying, "hidden injuries" that impact the relationship between communities of color and police. One must wonder how these "hidden injuries" impact the recruitment, hiring and onboarding of law enforcement officers across all spectrums of criminal justice, but specifically in police departments that primarily serve communities of color (Graham et al., 2020, p. 550). In the African American community, many parents share that "the talk" has become a pivotal conversation that is a part of the rights of passage into adulthood. This "talk" (or admonishment) is comprised of a step-by-step guide for how youth of color (mostly boys) should conduct themselves if they were to be stopped by a police officer. While most people would assume that "the talk" is unnecessary, because "if you just follow orders, you should be fine." However, for mothers and fathers of children of color, "the talk" is conveyed with the utmost seriousness, because it is viewed as a matter of life and death.

Stuart highlighted that though "the talk" may be aimed at improving interactions with police, it has adverse effects on the relationship between community members and law enforcement. The article stated, "the worry of Black parents conveyed via "the talk" to their children has substantial collateral consequences – many of which are "hidden." For example, the desire for members of the Black community to reduce contact with police inhibits general social interaction more broadly, which can harm not only the individual but also the community through the reduction of informal social control" (Stuart, 2016). This statement further supports our notion that to improve the recruitment of law enforcement officers of color, there must be strategic and intentional opportunities for reconciliation and healing. "The talk" has to shift from a discussion that the community has about law enforcement into a conversation that the community has with law enforcement officers.

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In the process of navigating the shift from a community discussion to an inclusive discussion with the police, Dr. Lorenzo Boyd (2010) sheds light on how police officer attitudes about the communities they serve inform the way in which incidents are responded to. In *Light Blue Versus Dark Blue: Attitudinal Differences in Quality-of-Life Policing*, Dr. Boyd asserts that “Black police officers have a more positive view on quality of life policing than white officers. Quality of life policing takes into consideration the aspect of a neighborhood and the interventions used to respond to calls.” It becomes important for the community to feel seen by the officers who serve them and we are currently seeing that the divide is impacting the cultural composition of the New Haven Police Department despite the city’s diverse population.

Concept/Plan of Action:

In May of 2015, former Mayor Toni N. Harp’s Police and Community Relations Task Force worked to address community/police relations in New Haven. The final recommendations on behalf of the task force suggested the need for clear and frequent communication between NHPD and the public. Recommendations called for the NHPD to create opportunities in schools and communities for positive, non-enforcement interactions with the police. The Department should also publicize the beneficial outcomes and images of positive, trust-building partnerships and initiatives. The final initiative that came from this recommendation was for the NHPD to strive to create a workforce that contains a broad range of diversity including race, gender, language, life experience, and cultural background to improve understanding and effectiveness in dealing with all communities. (MPCTF, 2016, p. 17-18)

In 2016/2017 the Mayor’s Police and Community Task Force (MPCTF) created a report regarding recruitment and retention for community-based policing for the New Haven Police Department. The intent behind the report was to increase the number of New Haven residents, people of color, women, LGTB, and bilingual officers within the New Haven Police Department. The rationale is the NHPD does not reflect the demographics of the city of New Haven. At the time of the report, African Americans, Hispanics, and Latinos made up close to 60% of the New Haven population. The approximate percentages of minority sworn officers were 47.5% (Hispanics 20.8% and African Americans 25.6%). (MPCTF, 2016-2017, p. 1) As of January 31, 2022, the total minority percentage is 41% (21% African Americans, 19% Hispanics and 1% Other) (NHPD, 2022).

In the article, *Understanding Youth Perceptions of Police Legitimacy* (Master’s thesis), S. Hockin states there are various ways in which our youth are exposed to police officers; social media and personal experiences being two broad themes that emerge. Shaping appropriate perceptions based on exposure to police officers in addition to the context in which a situation unfolds is not always lucid (Hockin, 2017, p. 52) Social media adds to the complexity of developing such understanding because of the inevitable filter it creates. Hockin (2017) identified several themes of social media as a tool for creating perceptions of the police. There were two, however, that explain this filter; only seeing extreme instances and avoiding vicarious experiences (Hockin, 2017).

If youth do not want to look at or watch something on social media, they are capable of avoiding it. This filter also serves as a way to most often exposing youth to the most extreme instances of violence (Hockin, 2017, p. 50). While this may be influential for most people, it especially

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poignant with those who have little to no first hand encounters to compare it to (Hockin, 2017, p. 50). Personal experience, whether it be via first hand or vicarious experiences, perceptions of police are influenced in a way that may also shape attitude. Hockin (2017) also found that many people's perceptions are formed during adolescence but shift as the person ages.

Our plan of action includes a survey which will consist of questions related to community interactions with the police, experiences, and feelings on pursuing a career in law enforcement. Using a social media platform, engaging in personal and professional networks we will create a video to share information on the project and deliver the online survey. Our goal is to have 100 people participate in the survey. The data gathered will be used to enhance community relationships with local police officers. Our goal is to restore and change the negative police narrative and engage youth in the community to consider a career as a police officer. This plan of action has also been informed by Dr. Lorenzo Boyd during a virtual consultation session on February 1, 2022, in his statement that "you can't hate up close". During this consultation session, Dr. Boyd elaborated on how important it is for the community to have positive experiences and feel validated by members of their police department because in having these new experiences they would be able to have one officer they know who is in their eyes for the community.

Resources Needed:

We will need community spaces to host the forums which will include, Ms. Yakeita Robinson-Chief of Staff at LEAP to grant us access to the youth in her program, Ms. Jacqueline Byrne-Hamden Youth Services and Strengthening Police and Community Partnership (SPCP) for collaboration in their efforts to open these conversations, and the New Haven and Hamden Police Department Chiefs to allow us access to officers who may be willing to participate in our project. New Haven Job Corp will also be a community resource we would like to partner with to reach their students.

A key resource needed will be officers willing to arrive at the table and to actively listen to the community's pain, validate and pave a way to more positive police experiences. Our team finds it important to provide the community with a platform to express their hopes for how they wish to be policed as supported by Boyd et al, 2007, "One way to curb the negative relations between the police and the community is through increased positive interactions. The police will always appear to be a distant and faceless entity as long as they are removed from the community and separated by mobile patrol, and reactive policing." It is part of our plan to cast a net for officers of color who are willing to show up for what may be difficult, yet healing conversations in order to promote a healing process for our communities and to promote a diverse police body through connection and validation from New Haven police officers.

Timeline:

We hope to complete the online survey and have a joint discussion panel with community volunteers and police officers before the end of the program. This would be an ongoing project that we hope to collaborate with local organizations to implement independently over time from the scope of healing law enforcement trauma in order to positively impact recruitment efforts.

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