



OVERCOMING STEREOTYPES BETWEEN OFFICERS AND TEENS

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLICE OFFICERS AND TEENS HAS BUILT-IN COMPLEXITIES. Countless youth development studies have shown that the road to adulthood in teenage years is marked by a need to take risks and test authority. Social scientists posit that it is a natural part of an evolutionary pattern of seeking independence and autonomy. However, it is also known that the human brain continues to grow into the mid-twenties, with the frontal cortex that governs executive decision-making being the last part to develop. The stark truth about adolescence is that, at some point, most kids push the boundaries of risk and rebellion with a degree of recklessness they will outgrow in later years.

Most police officers have had firsthand experience with this phenomenon. Law enforcement officers, as symbols of authority, are often perceived by teenagers as an opposing force that should be resisted and not trusted. Resistance is heightened particularly for urban youth whose perceptions of police are further affected by generational transmission of trauma from negative police encounters.

YOUTH POLICE INSTITUTE

In 2003, the head of the Baltimore, Maryland, Police Academy was particularly troubled by the antipathy inner city youth had for members of the force. At that time, there were no resident requirements to become a Baltimore police officer. He realized that most of the recruits coming into the academy were white men with little city experience or knowledge of the urban youth culture.



These new officers complained that they did not know how to talk to kids, nor did they understand their music, dress, or lexicon.

In turn, the youth that the academy head reached out to were adamant that the officers they encountered were hostile and unfairly harsh. With a communication gridlock and a clear clash of cultures, the academy head approached the North American Family Institute, a national youth development organization about developing a way to break through the opposing stereotypes that both cadets and young people held.

The resulting training, created by North American Family Institute, is the Youth & Police Initiative (YPI), which brings together 15 teens to talk through their feelings and experiences about police as they prepare to share stories about “choices” the teens have made in different parts of their lives. YPI is a community-based approach, targeted to the needs of individual neighborhoods and police departments. Youth with the most police contact and the police who patrol their neighborhood are selected in partnership with a local youth organization, nonprofit, grassroots organization, probation office, housing development, school, after-school club, or other community

resource. Youth are paid a stipend of \$100 for their time and contribution. The program includes five to six days of two- to three-hour sessions, including a graduation. In the last two sessions, eight to ten local officers join the teens, at first to listen to the surprisingly candid life stories the youth have been practicing for three sessions, but then to also share the officers’ own stories of how they went from being teenagers to joining a police force. The officers are encouraged by the trainers to make their sharing as personal and “real” as possible.

From the exchange, two remarkable truths become evident. The youth discover that the officers have had their own difficult histories and share far more in common with the young people than the youth ever imagined. The officers are also surprised and impressed that the teens can stand before them and deliver personal stories about their hopes and regrets. The breakthrough is dramatic, a door to a new level of openness neither group had anticipated.

The officers and teens spend the remainder of their time together doing highly interactive, experiential (including role-reversal roleplay), and structured exercises. These are followed by in-depth discussions using

evidence-based approaches that create new levels of communication that engender sustainable relationships with reduced negative perceptions.

GOALS & OUTCOMES

Since that first session 18 years ago, more than 6,000 teens and 3,000 officers from 31 cities across the United States, as well as in Bermuda and Belize, have completed the training. The immediate goals of YPI are to

- Establish trust between youth, police and the community
- Increase mutual understanding
- Improve relations
- Break down stereotypes
- Model and practice leadership and public speaking skills
- Develop action plans for sustained positive change
- Ultimately, reduce arrests and decrease violence

An evaluation was conducted that included field-tested pre- and post-surveys administered in person or online; focus groups and field observations were led by Dr. Nina Rose Fischer in Brooklyn, New York; Long Island, New York; and Kansas City, Missouri. Results were analyzed following a single-phase triangulation design



and qualitative and quantitative data were equally weighted and analyzed separately.

Qualitative Outcomes

The contrasts between what teens and officers reported before the training versus after were dramatic. Before the training youth relayed the following perceptions of police:

Officers just stopping people for no reason. They abuse their authority. They just stop you because of the way you look. You could be just minding your business walking up the block, and they could stop me, talking about what am I doing, where am I coming from.

I can't say all of them [police officers], but you got some of them that grew up in the projects, and that's officers that know what's going on, the cool officers. Then you got the officers that don't know the situation that some of us going through. So, they just look at it like, "Oh, this projects, they the worst," So they do what they do.

A cop could see you pull out a phone. Just because you're black, they say, "Yeah, it's a weapon." They would kill you.

Yet, after YPI, the youths' comments reflected a positive experience:

I'll say [YPI is] like a way of cops giving back to youth, and for you to

understand their viewpoint and ... that not all cops are bad.

[YPI is] also a way for you to connect with local police officers and work on your public speaking.

I talk about [YPI] highly because it helped me a lot with my public speaking and social skills.

Before, I had really bad experiences with police officers. I'm not saying I hate them anymore as much as I did. It made me feel comfortable with the police officers cause I know as a matter of fact there are good cops and there are bad cops. The cops that I've met was really fun. They were really nice. They were actually open to ideas and their opinions were expressed well. So that changed a little bit of my mind.

In turn, before YPI, examples of what officers said included

Right now, the toughest thing is, because of the news and how everything is against police, due to some minor incidents that have occurred, it makes it a little bit harder. Because in their mindset, they feel like, "Oh, the police is the bad guy."

The uniform makes it harder, in general, because to some people it may represent a safe point, a safety net. But to some people, it represents that someone in their life was always being arrested by the police.

Maybe sometimes it was a bad incident. And sometimes, it's just a particular individual or particular household. They just don't like police.

Well, when you live in a housing complex, you don't really have a back yard. So, the public space is the hanging out area, and in the summer a lot of units don't have AC. So, they heat up, so that causes people to go outside. Yeah, so one thing I would do if I was like in charge, I'm not the mayor or anybody like that, is you've got to put more AC unit in some of these housing units.

After YPI, the police's comments included the following:

I think the training is excellent. You know, it's a great way to interact with today's youth. They get to see their side, and I think that's half the problem, you know, the kids look at police today in a different manner. I think it's a good way for us to understand them and for them to understand us. And I think at the end of this six days, it seems like it works because whatever they start off with their opinion on the first day seems to be totally different on the last day.

I think the one we did on stereotypes... was fantastic because you know what it did, I learned as much as they did on that one. And I thought about how I looked at some of the youth in the community, you know, as an adult and it caused me to take a step back and to reevaluate my own thoughts.

I would describe YPI as a tool to allow youth in our communities to see police officers in a different light without the badge. Without having to interact with us on a negative situation. Most times when we do interact with youth who aren't fortunate enough to participate in programs like that, it's usually because something negative happened and somebody had to dial 911 and then we've responded in, you know, had to act accordingly or, you know, use our powers accordingly. And so, with this, it gives them a way to see us as people; that we are not the uniform that we wear. And it affords us the opportunity to build the relationships outside of the uniform and start building the trust so that they know that, you know, we're human just like them. You

know, we're just like your parents. We go to work every day, we do our jobs, and it also gives us the opportunity to let them know that a lot of times what they see unfold is due to lack of communication. With this particular program, we do a lot of communicating about choices that we've made, whether they've been negative or not.

Quantitative Outcomes

The statistical analysis from the survey responses showed that there were significant positive changes in youth perceptions of officers and officer perceptions of youth in all locations. Paired tests showed statistical significance from pre- to post-YPI ($p = .001$) on all survey items. The youth response to “The police really care about what is good for the neighborhood” increased by 200 percent from disagree to agree. “I know at least one police officer whom I can trust” shifted the most—214 percent from neutral to strongly agree.

For the officers, paired t-tests showed statistical significance from pre- to post-YPI ($p = .001$) on all survey items. Officers’ response to “It is a waste of taxpayer money for police officers to spend time talking with teens” changed 140 percent from neutral to disagree. “I don’t feel confident when communicating with teenagers” shifted 140 percent from neutral to strongly disagree.

Overall, both teens and officers reported being transformed by the experience of YPI. After one YPI program, Nathaniel, a youth from Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York, said,

You don't usually get to speak your mind with officers, they don't want to hear. They heard us. That was very surprising, that the communication was there for once.

After one YPI program, Officer Perez, a public housing officer in Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York, said,

I always knew that a lot of youth had it rough and had it rough with the cops, but I never heard it to this extent. I can only imagine what it's like to leave your

house and [think], “S—t, I'm gonna get stopped 15 times.” Right? It sucks.

One of the outcomes of YPI is a discovery that, for many youth, police are perceived in two ways at once: On one hand, they are feared for being authoritarian, menacing, racist, and unsympathetic. Yet, at the same time, they are secretly admired for their power and their authority to use weapons and arrest and detain people. As iconic authority figures to adolescents, police officers can conjure up fear, mistrust, anger, and hate or they can be a source of comfort, security, and admiration. Children and adolescents in neighborhoods with dominant police presence have their own negative experiences with police that are often shared by their friends and family members. This collective trauma generates fear. In turn, police, some with negative assumptions because of a lack of familiarity or connection to the communities they work in, are unprepared to face the outcomes of this trauma—resistance and distrust from young people. Police then develop their own antipathy that is shared with fellow officers. A culture clash ensues between young people and officers, defined by a cycle of fear and retribution.

YPI has discovered that, while many youth exhibit a distrust and fear of police, they also seek authority figures who will accept and respect them. YPI has shown that increased communication through interactive activities and role playing the daily encounters between youth and police in a safe, neutral environment brings enormous benefits to the community: reduced crime and community complaints about police and an overall increase in positive attitudes of youth and police toward each other and the community. Parents of the teens are invited to attend the graduation dinner, and this parent involvement strengthens the impact on youth and extends the network of the officers to include the parents.

YPI has proven to be especially effective at breaking down the negative stereotypes that often strain the

relationships between youth and police, humanizing the challenges that each group faces. As teens learn to trust police officers, there is also an associative effect. They enlarge their trust in other authority figures in school and in their communities. Officers, in turn, enhance their ability to listen to youth and learn ways to convey respect during their communication and employ de-escalation techniques that do not include firearms or arrests, providing a powerful means to reduce disproportionate negative contact with youth of color in low-income neighborhoods.

YPI has been effective with an incredibly diverse array of communities, especially in low-income communities with the largest police presence. YPI is place based. The purveyors meet with both leaders of youth organizations and police departments to establish a training relevant to that specific community. Sustainability is key to the model. YPI’s Train-the-Trainer program certifies local officers and youth workers to continue the training with more groups of young people and officers after the initial cohort. This creates a contagion effect where both groups start to hear from their peers that “this officer is cool” and “that kid is going to college.” Longitudinal research of YPI at a public housing development in Boston, Massachusetts, showed that the increasingly positive context between youth and police ultimately changed the culture of fear to one of safety and trust. ♡

IACP RESOURCES

- Advancing Juvenile Justice in Law Enforcement
- Law Enforcement’s Leadership Role in Juvenile Justice Reform

theIACP.org

- Implementing a Youth Engagement Strategy

policechiefmagazine.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO WWW.YPIWORLD.ORG.