

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

GETTING STARTED

Talking to Your Communities

Top Takeaways

Public trust and engagement are essential to the successful reimagining of public safety.

Meaningful, transparent inclusion of community perspectives must be part of the reimagining process at every stage. Although each jurisdiction is different, several principles can help guide your efforts:

- Center the perspectives of the people impacted most heavily by policing.
- Ensure that public engagement opportunities are accessible and ongoing, and that systems of oversight are – and are perceived to be – serious and credible.
- Acknowledge and build on historical experience through honest conversation about past and present inequities and by drawing on leaders with prior involvement in police reform.

Public safety and public trust are mutually dependent – neither is sustainable without the other. That's why the successful reimagining of public safety requires meaningful, transparent, and ongoing engagement with residents in the design, implementation, and oversight of new strategies.

In this document, we identify and elevate several critical elements to consider when soliciting community partnership. There is no foolproof, one-size-fits-all framework that will address fully the needs of all people in all places at all times – communities simply are too diverse, especially when it comes to attitudes about policing and public safety. But there are principles and real-world examples to draw upon to help engage residents in ways that do not generate tension or alienation, and instead build trust and shared purpose.

Who Is Meant by ‘Community’?

Before getting to “how,” let’s talk about “who.” What exactly do we mean by “community?”

In the broadest sense, community can refer to all residents throughout a jurisdiction. But for the purpose of reimagining public safety, we recommend a tighter focus on neighborhoods and individuals that are most heavily policed or that call upon 911 most frequently.

Why? First, these are the groups most likely to feel the direct impact of any change in public safety systems and policy. Second, they also are the people most likely to have experienced the historic inequities surrounding law enforcement, and – as a consequence – are least likely to trust the police.¹ In the United States, this most typically means people of color – especially Black and Brown people – the poor, immigrants, and other marginalized groups.

When we conducted our RPS community conversations – day long events in cities from

1 Ortiz, A. (2020, August 12). Confidence in Police Is at Record Low, Gallup Survey Finds. The New York Times. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/us/gallup-poll-police.html>

Denver to Tucson – we used a specific recruitment methodology to bring individuals from impacted communities to the table.² We considered both geographic and personal attributes of the group.

With respect to geography, we wanted to have a significant representation of residents who lived in areas with high levels of calls for service (911 calls) or high arrest rates.

And with respect to personal attributes, we brought together a mix of people with varying levels of involvement in prior police reform efforts. They were roughly divided among those who had previously engaged as formal leaders, previously engaged as informal leaders, or previously not engaged at all. This method was helpful in capturing a relevant spectrum of community representation, including perspectives informed by proximity to both the impacts of policing and reform efforts.

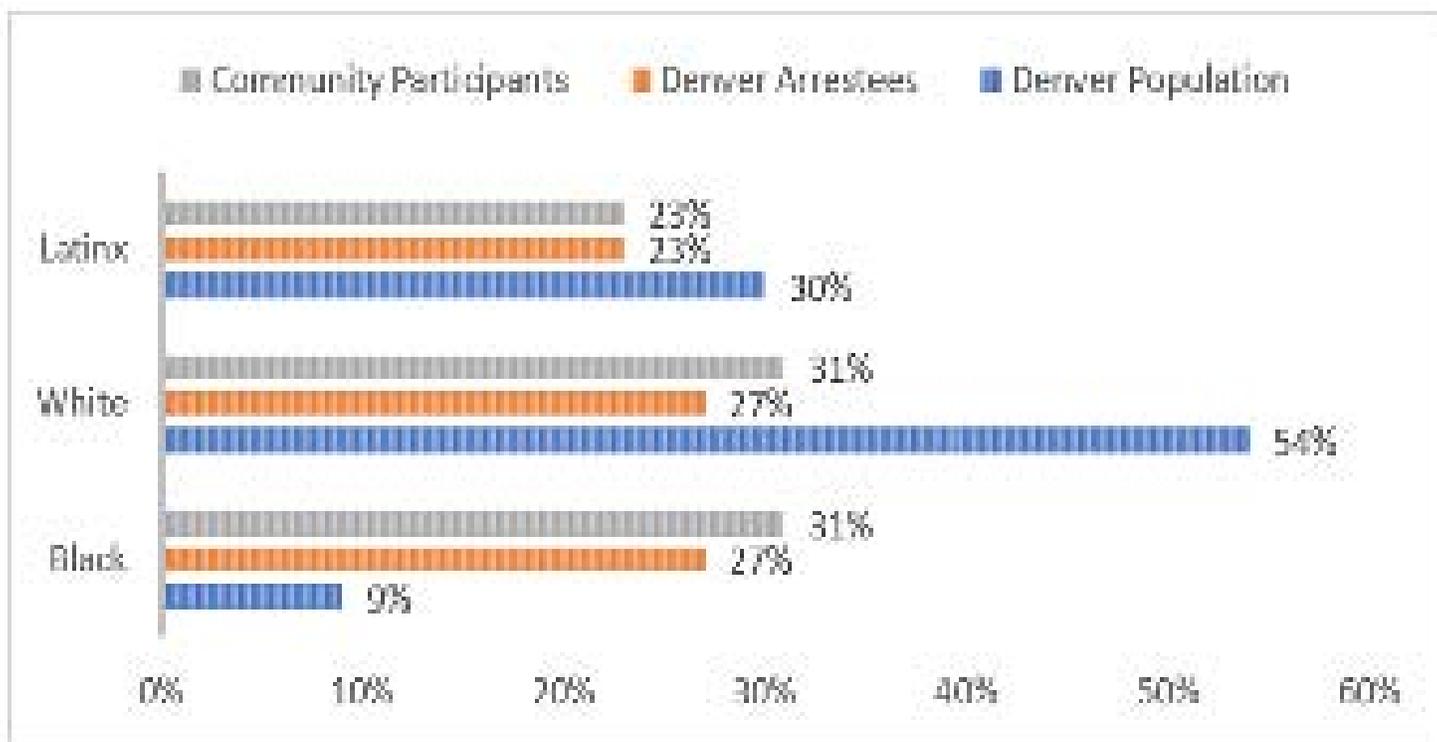
2 Methodology developed by Dr. Tamara Leech.

Involvement in Reform Efforts

Geographic Area	Involvement in Reform Efforts			TOTAL
	Formal Representative	Informal Leader	Previously Disconnected	
High Arrest Rates	4	6	5	15
Other Areas	7	2	2	11
TOTAL	11	8	7	26

Figure 1: Recruitment matrix from an RPS community conversation hosted in Denver, demonstrating diversity along geographic and previous reform involvement attributes. Full report *Transforming Denver’s First Response Model: Lessons in Multi-level Systems Change* forthcoming.

This method also was instrumental in achieving a racial distribution of research participants that tracked with the racial makeup of citywide arrestees, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Note: 12% of our participants identify as Native American, but we could not obtain arrest rate data for that population. None of our participants identifies as NHOPI or Asian/PI.

Figure 2: Racial breakdown of community conversation participants in Denver. Full report *Transforming Denver’s First Response Model: Lessons in Multi-level Systems Change* forthcoming.

Principles of Reimagined Engagement

Despite there being significant nuance and diversity in the experiences of communities across the United States, there are several principles worth striving to incorporate when soliciting community input on reimagining efforts. These are:

- **Transparent, open, and genuine partnership.**

Meaningful community engagement is not a box-checking exercise, and if you treat it as such participants will recognize that for what it is. Jurisdictions must see communities as true partners in preserving public safety. To this end, hosting one-off or irregularly-occurring town halls and listening sessions are insufficient to address the full range of community safety concerns. Residents have long demanded justice and equitable public safety systems, and part of ensuring that government meets that demand is by establishing transparent mechanisms for community input and/or oversight.

At the same time, providing endless opportunities for residents to share their perspectives and vocalize anxieties into a microphone are likely to prove financially and logistically unsustainable for jurisdictions to maintain – *and* may inadvertently alienate communities that have long expressed the harms they experience as a result of policing, and wonder why they are doing it yet again.

One valuable alternative may be for municipalities to meet on an ongoing basis with a subset of residents who can give feedback and provide some level of oversight to new safety strategies. We discuss this further below.

- **Respect for and responsiveness to history.** It is likely that local leaders, organizations, and residents in the community have engaged around issues of public safety and policing long prior to any new reimagining effort, and that these conversations have been informed in part by the broader history of unequal treatment, injustice, and harm experienced by communities of color in policing and other fields. There must be a genuine effort to acknowledge the truth of this history and to understand who has led action around these issues in the community, looking to their subject matter expertise to support and guide new efforts.

- **Accessibility.** Every effort should be made to design engagement efforts that are as accessible and inclusive as possible. In-person meetings should be held in neutral locations that are easily accessible via public transportation. Whether taking place virtually or in person, translation services should be made available, as well as any necessary or appropriate ADA accommodations. Opportunities for contribution also should be provided outside traditional Monday thru Friday, 9AM - 5PM hours so as to not conflict with residents' work obligations. The police department is not the place to hold these conversations.

- **Compensation.** People should not have to work for free, and that is especially true for individuals from impacted communities. For residents you have enlisted to provide formal, ongoing input or oversight, compensation will help facilitate their participation and demonstrate that their perspective and expertise truly are valued. Budgeting for this purpose is essential.

Community Engagement Models in the Field

Though once again recognizing community differences and the need to adapt strategies that speak to a jurisdiction's local culture, diversity, and customs, the following models may offer useful guidance for public engagement.

Learning through community conversations

Our RPS community research has placed us in dialogue with residents across the United States to better understand how they define public safety, perceive their local policing systems, and want to improve the services and resources currently delivered by their governments. **Dr. Tamara Leech** developed the methodology for some of these conversations and led the work, together with the support of her research team and Policing Project staff. Here, we discuss the methods we used for the community conversations.

These day-long data gathering events with residents discuss the following types of questions.

- How do residents define public safety?
- How do they characterize organizations' and professionals' roles and responsibilities for establishing public safety?
- What do they believe are the most effective public safety mechanisms?
- Which existing first response services are effective/ineffective?
- Where and how do residents want to obtain first response services?
- At what stage of readiness for change are residents?



In our formal community conversations, we collected input through three primary mechanisms.

1. Upon arriving to the community conversation, residents completed an enrollment survey that asks about participants' perceptions of the local police, demographics, and how they utilize public safety services.
- Next, residents participated in small focus groups facilitated by local moderators.
2. The morning session is structured by predetermined questions related to how residents define public safety and utilize the services and resources currently provided in their jurisdiction.
 3. In the afternoon, focus groups discuss themes that emerged throughout the morning dialogue. This allows participants to talk directly with one another about the public safety issues and topics that are most important to them.

Prior to conducting the conversations, we established a Local Advisory Board. The Board is made up of 4 – 7 residents with diverse backgrounds and valuable local experience. They help to guide our work on the ground. We identified these individuals by meeting with residents – in barber shops, parks, community centers, and libraries – to familiarize ourselves with local issues and culture. This is a valuable step even in your jurisdiction, as you may have less familiarity with local communities, individuals, and their concerns than you think. This approach also reduces relying on the same set of individuals who typically engage with the police and government. As previously discussed, the goal is to capture a diverse group of individuals with broad, varying experiences.

Advisory Board members also support participant recruitment, review research questions for wording and local relevancy, and provide feedback on preliminary research findings. They are compensated for their time, as are community conversation participants.

This formal, ongoing partnership with residents to collaborate on research efforts keeps the design, methodology, and deliverables community centered.



Involving community through task forces and working groups

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

In July 2020, the Oakland City Council passed a resolution establishing the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force, charged with developing recommendations for enhancing safety by exploring alternative response models and eliminating the root causes of crime and violence, such as homelessness and job insecurity. To support this work and oversee this process, Oakland enlisted two organizations – **PolicyLink** and the **National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform** (NICJR).

The 17-member task force sought to include a diverse range of experience and expertise, recruiting formerly incarcerated individuals, immigrants, victims of crimes, public health experts, law enforcement professionals, and others. At the conclusion of a year's work, the members developed **88 recommendations** to present to the city council, tackling issues such as cutting police overtime budgets and funding alternative responder models.

To inform the development of comprehensive recommendations that adequately addressed the full range of Oakland residents' concerns and issues, the task force conducted a broad community input and solicitation process. The task force provided grants to 12 community-based organizations to conduct research, which administered surveys, focus groups, town halls, and listening sessions with residents. For example, **Youth ALIVE!** – a local anti-violence prevention and advocacy non-profit – hosted multiple listening sessions with youth at local high schools, mothers of victims of violent crime, and organizational staff impacted by public safety issues. In this way, the task force was able to obtain input more directly from communities, and organizations were provided resources to support this work.

The task force engagement strategy also included a city-wide survey and the establishment of a voicemail box and e-mail address for residents to submit input on an ongoing basis, all of which have since been made publicly available.

“And to be frank, while the plan has a majority of Working Group and Subcommittee support, the suggestions were not unanimous decisions. We had some very difficult conversations as a Working Group: some thought our pace too fast, others too slow; some hoped for more change, others wished for much of the current public safety structure to stay intact; some felt heard, others felt misunderstood. Through any disagreement or difficulty, our ethos remained the same: we would treat all Working Group members with respect and dignity; we would honor the lived experiences of all participants; and we would make informed decisions democratically and transparently.”

Ithaca Reimagining Public Safety Working Group

ITHACA, NEW YORK

Ithaca’s Reimagining Public Safety Working group was established in 2021 to support replacing the Ithaca Police Department with a Department of Public Safety, which would have separate divisions for police and community solutions. The working group consisted of residents, law enforcement professionals, city personnel, and subject matter experts, and had four subcommittees focused on: staffing and shift assignments, training and equipment, research and data, and budgeting for the new public safety model.

The working group was tasked with specific deliverables, including the important responsibility of determining which call types – issues that people call 911 about – would be handled by the new alternative responder team and which by police.

To solicit community input throughout this process, Ithaca established publicsafetyreimagined.org, an online board for residents to submit input on the working group’s efforts, as well as a one-stop-shop for archived resolutions, legislation, news, and press releases related to reimagining. The city held informational meetings for individuals to learn about the site’s functionality and uses.

Ithaca’s online hub for community input was supplemented by in-person and virtual forums with residents. To recruit participants, the city placed weekly ads in a local newspaper to run the course of a year, including updates on the reimagining process and space for residents to mail in comments and feedback.

Integral to supporting Ithaca in its reimagining process was the [Center for Policing Equity \(CPE\)](#), a national organization that uses science and data to support the development of safer, just communities. CPE facilitated the subcommittees and served as content advisors.

Ongoing engagement through community advisory boards

Some jurisdictions engage their communities on an ongoing basis by establishing Community Advisory Boards (CABs), or groups of community representatives that assemble to meet with government and police to discuss the means, ends, and consequences of local policing. These boards vary greatly across municipalities but typically are comprised of unpaid volunteers who liaise between residents and police, as well as provide feedback on new or existing policies and practices.

Establishing a productive local CAB requires jurisdictions to be clear and transparent about the role and responsibilities of such bodies. Among other considerations are: how members are appointed, meeting frequency, oversight powers and feedback mechanisms, and whether or not the CAB will be resourced with staff and a budget. Failing to clearly define the purpose of a CAB may further strain relations between police and residents.

See Policing Project’s [Community Advisory Boards: What Works and What Doesn’t](#) for further reading on the utility of CABs.

Engagement through broader public safety oversight systems

In 2021 the Chicago City Council passed an ordinance establishing the [Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability](#), one of the strongest police oversight bodies in the nation. The Commission will help select police officials (e.g., Police Superintendent, Police Board members), draft and set department policies, and review and recommend police budget changes. A full list of the Commission's powers and responsibilities can be found [here](#).

The board is comprised of 7 residents with a demonstrated history of community involvement and experience in working on behalf of marginalized groups. Interim members submitted an application to participate, were nominated by the City Council, and ultimately appointed by the Mayor. The Commission's inaugural meeting took place in September 2022.

In addition to designing a commission for community oversight, Chicago has also established [District Councils](#) to operate in each of the city's 22 police districts. Councils will be three-member bodies that liaise between community, police officials, and the Commission. This is an elected position and candidates will run every four years. Among other powers, members have the important task of nominating permanent Commission candidates for the Mayor to review.

The Commission, which has direct community involvement and is empowered to oversee public safety services in Chicago, is an example of an existing oversight entity that can be utilized as a vehicle for ongoing community engagement in reimagining public safety efforts.

Additional Resources

[Beyond the Conversation: Ensuring Meaningful Police-Community Engagement](#), Policing Project at NYU Law
[Community Advisory Boards: What Works and What Doesn't](#), Policing Project at NYU Law
[Five Questions to Ensure Meaningful Engagement](#), Policing Project at NYU Law

safetyreimagined.org

