



Guide for Improving  
Relationships  
and Public Safety  
through Engagement  
and Conversation



# Contents

Letter from the Director .....	iii
Acknowledgments .....	v
Foreword .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
How to use this toolkit .....	2
Project background .....	2
Planning the Dialogue .....	5
Getting community buy-in .....	5
Planning logistics .....	6
Identifying youth participants .....	7
Recruiting youth participants .....	8
Reaching police participants .....	9
Setting the Agenda .....	11
Goals for youth participants .....	11
Identifying outcomes .....	11
Working with Youth .....	13
Partnering with Police .....	15
Challenge #1. Assumption of traditional roles .....	15
Response to Challenge #1 .....	15
Challenge #2. Fostering an open dialogue .....	16
Response to Challenge #2 .....	16
Challenge #3. Sustainability .....	16
Response to Challenge #3 .....	16
Facilitating the Dialogue .....	17
Selecting a facilitator .....	17
Preparation sessions .....	17
Police preparation sessions .....	19
During the dialogue .....	20

After the Dialogue .....	23
Conclusion .....	25
Site Visits .....	27
About the Center for Court Innovation .....	31
About the COPS Office .....	32



# Letter from the Director

Dear colleagues,

I want to thank the Center for Court Innovation Staff and the Police-Youth Dialogue Advisory Board for putting this excellent toolkit together. It fulfills a great need: to help law enforcement build trust with young people and provide the guidance and role models they need.

Developed with funding from the COPS Office and drawing upon successful strategies from police/youth projects across the country, the toolkit provides an overview of documented practices as well as a detailed guide to initiating and sustaining productive dialogue with teenagers.

A valuable resource for community leaders and social services providers as well as law enforcement, it provides easily implementable activities and procedures with step-by-step instructions for choosing discussion topics, creating an environment conducive to candor, and more.

Created with input from young people who were interviewed at sites throughout the country, it is a down-to-earth guide to not only communicating with teenagers but also understanding them. And as existing programs in cities such as Spokane, Washington, have shown, the practices outlined in the toolkit can not only break down barriers between police and young people but also improve community relations as a whole.

Without our support and guidance, young people can be easily led into trouble and exposed to crime and violence. We can help our youth avoid such problems through engagement in simple activities such as tutoring, coaching a sports team, or just establishing a personal relationship through conversation.

As President Obama has stated when discussing the “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative and the need for adults to serve as mentors: “It doesn’t take that much, but it takes more than we are doing now.” This report is in part a tool to help communities respond to the President’s call to action and work to ensure all of youth have a fair and equal opportunity to advance.

Sincerely,

Ronald L. Davis, Director

Office of Community Oriented Policing Services





# Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank everyone who contributed to *Police-Youth Dialogues*.

## Members of the Police-Youth Dialogue Advisory Board

- Kim Bogucki, Detective, Seattle (Washington) Police Department
- Theron Bowman, Deputy City Manager, Arlington, Texas
- James Brodick, Director, Brooklyn Community Justice Centers, Center for Court Innovation, Brooklyn, New York
- Khaair Morrison, Youth Member, New York City
- George Mosee, Deputy District Attorney, Philadelphia District Attorney's Office
- Kevin O'Connor, Assistant Commissioner, Commanding Officer Juvenile Justice Division, New York City Police Department
- Denisse Ovalle, Youth Member, New York City
- Linda Pupolo, Deputy Commissioner of Planning, White Plains, New York
- William Singleton, Officer, Students Talking it Over with Police, Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Police Department
- Frank Straub, Chief, Spokane (Washington) Police Department
- Nascha Streng, Youth Member, New York City
- Lisa Thureau, Founder and Executive Director, Strategies for Youth, Inc., Boston

## COPS Office

- Vonda Matthews, Program Officer, Washington, D.C.

## Site Visit Interviews

When possible, youth dialogue participants were interviewed at each site. Their names are not listed to protect their privacy.

- Jacob Corr, Team Captain, Milwaukee County District Attorney Prosecution Unit
- Ronald L. Davis, Director, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, Washington, D.C.
- Renee Forte, Sergeant, New Haven (Connecticut) Police Department
- Eric Lulow, Youth Trainer, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland
- Rhonda McKitten, Director of Juvenile Grants and Policy, Defender Association of Philadelphia
- Police Trainee, Philadelphia Police Academy
- William Singleton, Officer, Students Talking it Over with Police (STOP) Program, Milwaukee Police Department
- Thomas Warren Sr., President and Chief Executive Officer, Urban League of Nebraska
- Sam Williams, Executive Vice President and Director of Community Relations, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee

## Center for Court Innovation Staff

Linda Baird, Raye Barbieri, Greg Berman, Nicholas Chung, Nancy Fishman, Viviana Gordon, Dory Hack, Elise Jensen, Emily Gold LaGratta, Julius Lang, Suvi Hynynen Lambson, Colin Lentz, Avni Majithia-Sejpal, Sarah Schweig, Mari Slater, Chante Ramsey, Elaine Shea, Brett Vetterlein, and Rob Wolf







# Foreword

Over a six-month period in 2006, while I was the public safety commissioner in White Plains, New York, the city experienced five separate incidents of knife and gun violence—two fatal—culminating in a shootout in the city’s largest public housing complex. Sadly, the city’s young people were involved each time. These events all started with common street disputes, such as wearing gang colors in the wrong neighborhood, retaliation for a robbery, a fight over girls, and an exchange of heated words between two groups of young people. Having so many incidents occur in such a short time brought the grim reality of youth violence home. Members of the community united in a commitment to make White Plains a safer place to live and called on the White Plains Police Department to take responsibility for preventing youth violence.

We found an organization called the North American Family Institute that was critical to achieving this goal. The North American Family Institute partnered with the city’s police department and youth bureau, as well as community leaders and school officials, to develop and implement a program with two goals: (1) reducing youth violence and (2) improving police officers’ relationships with youth. Over the next three years, the newly minted Youth and Police Initiative brought every uniformed member of the White Plains Police Department and more than 200 young people together in dialogue, role play, and team building exercises. The program did more than significantly improve youth-police and police-community relations in White Plains; I believe that Youth and Police Initiative and its partners in the community were directly responsible for significantly reducing incidences of youth violence in White Plains during my tenure as commissioner.

Since then, I’ve introduced the Youth and Police Initiative in two other cities: Indianapolis, Indiana, where I was the public safety director from 2010–2012, and Spokane, Washington, where I now serve as the city’s police chief. In the eight years since the Youth and Police Initiative was introduced, I have witnessed the long-term benefits that police-youth dialogues can bring to communities. For example, officers and teens in White Plains participated in team building exercises together in the common area of a public housing complex. This was the first time many parents saw their children interacting with police officers in a positive manner. Parents started coming out to the exercises, began talking to the police officers, and asked how they could get engaged in crime prevention programs. That summer, those adults became coaches and referees for a basketball league, manned barbeques during a series of police-community events, and formed a neighborhood watch. Crime in the housing complex dropped as residents and police officers partnered to build a safe environment.

In Spokane, the police-youth dialogue has provided the catalyst for increased community-police engagement—breaking down long-standing barriers between our department and the community. We are seeing individual community members, faith-based leaders, local businesses, and others come forward to expand youth opportunities around sports and mentoring. We have entered into an agreement with the school district to incorporate the Youth and Police Initiative in their school discipline process. We are partnering with shelters for high-risk youth to engage their residents in the Youth and Police Initiative and other programs. In slightly longer than 18 months, approximately 150 youth and 70 police officers have participated, and the program continues to expand.

While there is no single response to violence, gang involvement, poverty, unemployment, and other issues that challenge our youth, bringing police and teens together for meaningful conversations provides real opportunities for youth and police officers to move through stereotypes and other barriers, to see each other as people, and to develop patterns of respectful and legitimate communication.

I remember one conversation in White Plains where a young man asked one of the officers assigned to his public housing unit why the officer chased him every time he saw him. The officer asked the young man, “Why do you run every time you see me?” As it turned out, the norm for generations in the public housing complex was that parents told their children to run from the police. Field training officers told new police officers that if someone runs from you, it’s a sign that they did something suspicious and you should go after them. So for years a cycle built on misperceptions and erroneous beliefs on both sides persisted. After that conversation, there was a new understanding. Young people living in the building stopped running when they saw a police officer, the police officers stopped chasing them, and conversations between youth and police slowly replaced games of cat and mouse.

This toolkit provides a valuable resource for police officers, community leaders, service providers, and others committed to the critical work of building and maintaining impactful dialogue and relationships between our youth and police officers, as well as the broader community and our police officers. While there is no one-size-fits-all model for how to hold these conversations, the toolkit provides a good blueprint for getting started. Drawing from expertise developed by organizations across the country that are holding police-teen dialogues in their communities, the toolkit offers practical guidance on how to organize, implement, and sustain impactful programs.

I applaud the tremendous work of the Center for Court Innovation, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, and members of the project advisory board who have collaborated to make the toolkit a reality. Police-teen dialogues build trust between the police and the communities they serve that can help reduce crime rates and gang involvement; they provide opportunities for our young people to access needed services. These dialogues may also provide a forum in which we can discuss the challenges police departments face in the post-Ferguson era. I hope you will find the advice here useful as you consider how to bring these valuable conversations to your own community.



Frank Straub  
Chief, Spokane Police Department



# Introduction

Improving relationships between police and teenagers can feel like an intractable problem. Many young people are afraid that they will get arrested for saying the wrong thing to an officer, lack an understanding of their rights and appropriate ways to exercise them, and are concerned about the impression their peers will have if they are seen talking to police officers. Too often, young people associate police only with the possibility of getting into trouble.

On the other hand, police entrusted with protecting public safety must make the well-being of the community their primary concern, often questioning teens with an urgency that comes off as curt and contributes to youth anxiety. If young people and police encounter one another only on the street, this dynamic is difficult to change.

The task of improving police-youth relations is complicated by the reality that police officers are in a position of authority. Young people, fearful of the repercussions of interacting with police, are reluctant to engage in conversations in which they lack power. Further, cultural differences between police and young people can lead to an escalation of minor encounters.

*Police-Youth Dialogues* presents a different way. Police-youth dialogues are conversations that serve to build trust and understanding by allowing teens and police to speak honestly about their experiences interacting with one another in the community. These dialogues provide windows into the other's point of view, ultimately enabling participants to find common ground.

Across the country, organizations such as the North American Family Institute (which operates the Youth and Police Initiative) and Strategies for Youth, Inc. are bringing police and teenagers together for productive conversations. Recognizing the benefits of this

work, some police departments have begun holding dialogues on their own. This is the case in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the Students Talking it Over with Police program has served approximately 1,000 young people and has trained 50 Milwaukee police officers to be program facilitators since 2010.

The Center for Court Innovation, with the funding and support of the United States Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), developed this toolkit as a resource for communities interested in bringing police-youth dialogues into their neighborhoods. Drawing from projects across the country that use positive communication strategies to improve police-youth relations, *Police-Youth Dialogues* consolidates this expertise and provides an overview of documented strategies and promising practices. Resources for organizing and facilitating dialogues are included throughout this publication.

This toolkit can be a helpful first step toward breaking down longstanding barriers between youth and police. Hosting a successful police-youth dialogue requires a good deal of time, energy, and commitment from planners and participants. Yet toolkit researchers heard again and again from police departments and youth organizations that the effort was worthwhile. Most important, both police and youth consistently said that these conversations were profoundly valuable in establishing relationships between young people and officers.

The toolkit is designed primarily for use by organizations that fall into one of two categories: 1) those that are already organizing police-youth dialogues and would like to refine their approach or 2) those that do not yet have organized police-youth dialogues and would like to implement them locally. This publication assumes that participants in the dialogues will be

young people approximately ages 14 to 18 and police officers who work in their neighborhoods and have regular interactions with local youth.

## How to use this toolkit

It is important to keep in mind that the recommendations in this toolkit are intended for use as guidelines. Organizations can adapt these ideas for the unique needs of their communities. Project researchers observed successful dialogues that looked different from what this toolkit proposes, including programs that use police as facilitators and dialogues that are open to the entire community. The ideas presented here are designed to be broadly applicable with room for adjustment.

The Center for Court Innovation welcomes feedback and stories from organizations as they begin planning and holding dialogues in their communities. How have dialogues changed the relationship between youth and police? E-mail [info@courtinnovation.org](mailto:info@courtinnovation.org) to share experiences.

## Project background

### Framing the issue

When young people are stopped by police officers, the instinct to protect themselves or get away may lead them to take actions that needlessly cause themselves harm—for example, not answering questions or running from police. Police, at the same time, may not approach young people in a way that allows for the kind of information sharing that is critical to an officer's work. Strong community relationships are a necessary component to successful policing and have the ability to improve outcomes for young people and communities by reducing the number of teens who become involved with the justice system. Police-youth dialogues are a method of building these relationships.

### Project history

The Center for Court Innovation operates numerous programs for young people in New York City, including the Youth Justice Board, an after-school program designed to bring the voices of young people into policies that affect their lives. Each year, approximately 20 teens from across the city work with program staff to build personal and professional skills, including researching, public speaking, and interviewing, as well as public policy development. Each program cycle, board members produce informed recommendations for city policy makers, then work to implement select recommendations. In 2011, members of the Youth Justice Board were tasked with tackling the issue of improving police-teen relations, stemming from a recommendation in the report *Looking Forward: Youth Perspectives on Reducing Crime in Brownsville and Beyond*.<sup>1</sup>

That same year in New York City, more people than ever were stopped by police under the city's controversial Stop, Question, and Frisk policy, with communities of color disproportionately affected.<sup>2</sup> A 2011 survey of more than 450 New York City teens conducted by the Youth Justice Board found that teens' discomfort with police led to young people being afraid to ask for help and reluctant to report crimes they might have witnessed. In communities such as Brownsville, Brooklyn, where 44 percent of youth respondents to a 2010 community survey had been either stopped or stopped and frisked in the preceding year,<sup>3</sup> police-community relationships faltered. Respondents indicated negative feelings toward this practice, using words like "profiled" and "violated"

1. Youth Justice Board, *Looking Forward: Youth Perspectives on Reducing Crime in Brownsville and Beyond* (New York: Center for Court Innovation, 2011), <http://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/report%20for%20website.pdf>.
2. New York Civil Liberties Union, "Stop-and-Frisk Data," accessed September 23, 2014, <http://www.nyclu.org/content/stop-and-frisk-data>.
3. Suvi Hynynen, *Community Perceptions of Brownsville: A Survey of Neighborhood Quality of Life, Safety and Services* (New York: Center for Court Innovation, 2011), <http://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/Brownsville%20Op%20Data%20FINAL.pdf>.

to describe the experience.<sup>4</sup> In *Looking Forward*, the Youth Justice Board suggested implementing police-youth dialogues in Brownsville as a means of defusing tension and increasing understanding between young people and police.

To model this practice, members of the Youth Justice Board met with New York City police officers working in Brownsville in November 2011 for a 90-minute dialogue. During the discussion, the group addressed several issues including perceptions of police bias; young people's rights when dealing with police; and the city's Stop, Question, and Frisk policy. Board members said afterwards that they found the experience educational and rewarding and that this discussion helped them to understand the way police act, what was fair for them to expect from an officer, and what recourse they had if they felt they were being treated unfairly.

Youth participants were so energized by the conversation that they elected to create a video to share what they had learned from talking to police with a wide audience of young people and to encourage these types of conversations to be replicated elsewhere. The outcome was a seven-minute video called *Talking it Through: A Teen-Police Dialogue*.<sup>5</sup>

This experience highlighted that productive conversations require substantial work at every phase of the process: from meeting separately with young people and police in advance of the conversation to strong facilitation to creating and following through with a clear action plan that keeps participants informed



**Community members discuss a new antiviolence initiative with police officers in Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York.**

of the outcomes. After planning and implementing the dialogue between Brownsville police officers and youth, the Center for Court Innovation partnered with the COPS Office to research other police-youth dialogue projects and create this toolkit as a resource for jurisdictions looking to start or improve their own dialogues.

#### Research process

Staff from the Center for Court Innovation contacted more than 35 individuals from around the country with expertise in the field, including representatives from not-for-profits, police departments, government organizations, and academia, to learn their approaches to building positive police-youth relations. Based on these conversations, 13 individuals joined the project's advisory board to guide the development of the toolkit. Advisory board members reflect the diversity of stakeholders that are affected by police-youth dialogues, including police chiefs and officers, non-profit directors, and young people.<sup>6</sup>

4. Ibid.

5. Youth Justice Board, *Talking it Through: A Teen-Police Dialogue* (New York: Center for Court Innovation), accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/talking-it-through-teen-police-dialogue>.

6. Members of the advisory board are listed in *Acknowledgements* on page v.

The advisory board convened twice to provide guidance on the toolkit. The first meeting, in February 2013, identified sites for project staff to visit in order to observe police-youth dialogues and interview participants. Project staff visited the following sites between February and November 2013:

- West Side Story Project, Brooklyn, New York
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Engaging the Community in Preventing Youth of Color with Behavioral Health Conditions from Entering the Legal Justice System” dialogue, Rockville, Maryland
- Philadelphia Police Academy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Students Talking it Over with Police, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

- North American Family Institute, New Haven, Connecticut
- Youth Police Advisory Council, Houston, Texas

In February 2014, the advisory board reconvened to be briefed on the research findings and to provide feedback on proposed content for the final toolkit.

In addition to the site visits, project staff held a focus group with approximately 15 young people involved in programming at the Brownsville Community Justice Center, some of whom had direct justice system experience. The goal of that conversation was to get feedback on some of the promising practices included in this toolkit from young people living in a community with notoriously fraught police-youth relations.



# Planning the Dialogue

Investing in adequate time and planning resources will help ensure the dialogue is a positive experience for the participants and provides a meaningful contribution to the community at large.

## Getting community buy-in

The first step in the planning process—before approaching police departments and youth-serving organizations—should be considering how the dialogue will affect the community as a whole. Identifying stakeholders helps give the conversation momentum and provides a pathway to potential participants. As part of initial planning, organizers should speak to

- public agencies, particularly those under which young people and police may come in frequent contact (e.g. public housing, transit);
- schools;
- elected representatives;
- local businesses and associations;
- parent groups.

By including these individuals and organizations, planners can learn how police-youth relationships impact the community as a whole and pinpoint some of the places where challenges between youth and police frequently arise. Further, these partners can provide organizers with additional perspectives to bring into the dialogue.

Establishing the goals and general ground rules of the dialogue early on helps to get partners on board. Particularly in neighborhoods where there is a strong mistrust of police, potential participants, parents, and partner organizations must understand that young people and police will be on equal footing during this conversation. They need to know that young people will not be arrested based on what they say during

the conversation and that this is not a venue for “snitching.” Once the goals of the dialogue have been articulated, partners that can bring teens into the conversation will be more inclined to do so.

Further, community organizations may bring up issues for planners to consider when organizing the dialogue. Are there rival youth crews that should not be in the room together? Are there particularly sensitive issues that to be need addressed directly during the conversation or issues that should be avoided altogether for the conversation to be as productive as possible? What unique skills will be required of a facilitator in this particular community?

Once there is community buy-in, partners are essential allies in recruiting youth participants. In some cases in which police departments may be reticent to ask officers to commit time to participating in a dialogue, having the support of elected officials and organizations with strong ties to the police department may also help to get the buy-in necessary from the police department to make these conversations successful.

Community partners may be able to provide space to host the dialogues and offer incentives for youth participation. For example, they may have access to in-kind donations of food, passes to local museums, or tickets to sports events and movies. In addition, using a partner’s space to host the dialogue helps to create a welcoming environment, as these locations are often designed with young people in mind.

Finally, having the support of the community in advance can help lead to action after the conversation. For example, school officials may be able to reduce tensions between police and students if they have been part of the process of convening the dialogues and are briefed on relevant recommendations stemming from the conversations.

In some instances it may be appropriate to open up the conversation to additional individuals. This model is followed by the Houston Youth Police Advisory Council—which enables teens to share their concerns around specific, pre-determined topics like bullying, peer pressure and suicide—directly with the chief of police. Parents and community members are invited to listen to the conversation to learn how this issue is affecting young people in their community. However, adults are told at the beginning of the conversation that they will be asked to leave if at any point the teen participants are uncomfortable speaking openly with them in the room.

## Planning logistics

### Location

Hold the dialogue in a neutral space, outside of the police station, and preferably somewhere that youth programming already occurs. Young people in focus groups said that going somewhere familiar helped to make them feel comfortable. Further, they wanted a space without any negative associations. They suggested holding dialogues in their schools, in a performance space, or outside on a nice day. Wherever the conversation is held, make sure that it is in a quiet space without distractions where everyone is able to focus on the dialogue.

### Length

The dialogue facilitator should be prepared to lead at least three conversations: separate preparation sessions with young people and police lasting 30 to 60 minutes, and the dialogue itself, which should last between 90 minutes and two hours. In some cases, facilitators may hold follow-up conversations, including separate debrief conversations with youth and police, or a follow-up meeting with the entire group to discuss how things have changed since the initial conversation.

A variation on this model is offered by the Students Talking it Over with Police program in Milwaukee, where students and police meet for an hour once a week for seven sessions. This allows for the conversation to build from week to week.

In the case of discussions that participants are traveling to attend, such as the national dialogue convened at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,<sup>7</sup> holding a longer discussion over the course of multiple days is the most efficient use of time. Ensure the group is given plenty of breaks—informal interactions can be as powerful and long-lasting as the formal dialogues.

### Size

The ideal size for the dialogue is 15 to 20 total participants, with a ratio of approximately three young people to each police officer. A group of this size allows for a diversity of participants but is small enough to allow opportunities to contribute.

### Use of space

The way the dialogue space is used sets the tone for the discussion. Before beginning, consider the following questions:

- **How much space is needed?** If preparatory conversations are held with each group the day of the dialogue or a debrief of the discussion is held immediately afterward, consider ahead of time where the groups will meet privately.
- **Where will participants sit?** Consider seating in advance and how to prevent young people and police from clustering on different sides of the room. Some options to encourage mingling include assigning seats ahead of time, asking participants to spread out as they enter the room, or mixing up seating through an icebreaker performed at the beginning of the dialogue.

---

7. "Engaging the Community in Preventing Youth of Color with Behavioral Health Conditions from Entering the Legal Justice System," Dialogue Meeting hosted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, MD, April 22–23, 2013.



- **How is the tone for the conversation being set?** Consider the level of formality for the conversation and arrange the space accordingly. For example, seating participants behind a table and providing pens and notebooks suggests a more professional setting than chairs in a circle. While most young people indicated that they preferred an informal tone, either arrangement can work as long as all participants know what to expect.
- **How can the space be used for effective facilitation?** Make sure there is enough space to conduct ice-breakers, role plays, breakout sessions, and other activities that will have the group moving around.
- **Will food be served?** If so, when and where? Many facilitators serve food as a way to make participants comfortable. Serving food at the beginning will ensure no one is coming to the dialogue on an empty stomach. On the other hand, waiting until the end when the group is more comfortable allows for a natural closing that encourages the dialogue to continue informally. Youth focus group participants said that serving food in the middle or at the end of the dialogue was their preference. However, several dialogues observed by project researchers had food served at the beginning, which helped to break the ice among participants. Also consider whether participants will be allowed to eat during the dialogue and if it is more appropriate to serve food in an area separate from where the conversation will occur.
- **What supplies are needed?** From technology equipment like computers, projectors, and smartboards, to basics like flip-chart paper and markers, make sure all materials are on hand for the dialogue. Also confirm whether copy machines and Internet and e-mail access are available at the space, if needed.
- **How will the conversation be documented?** Documenting the conversation can help lead to action following the dialogue. Determine the method and then what materials or resources will be needed to capture what is said during the dialogue. For

example, an adult observer may be assigned to take notes, or the facilitator may record the dialogue and have it transcribed after the event.

- **How will cleanup be managed?** In all cases, leave the room as clean and organized as it was prior to the dialogue, being especially mindful of space belonging to a partner organization. Be sure to account for eating areas, bathrooms, and anywhere else participants may have congregated before and after the conversation.

## Identifying youth participants

Before beginning outreach to potential youth participants, the first question dialogue planners should ask is “who do I want in the room?” Consider the conversation goals and the characteristics of young people who can take the dialogue in a direction consistent with these goals.

Some things to consider include the following:

- **Age.** Dialogues have been tested with youth as young as 12 and old as 21. The dialogues seem to work best with high school-aged young people, as they are old enough to have had experiences with the police and mature enough to thoughtfully discuss their experiences while listening to police officers’ points of view.
- **Diversity.** With few exceptions, the participants in the dialogue should reflect the demographics of young people in the community. Consider how to recruit a group that is balanced in terms of gender, racial background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and justice system experience. If there is only one female participant or one participant of color or one youth with justice system involvement in the room, it can skew the dynamics of the conversation in ways that are unhelpful. Lisa Thureau, executive director of Strategies for Youth, Inc., said that one of the most powerful things that police took away from conversations was how similar concerns and fears of police were among all youth—even high-achieving young people who had never come in contact with the police before.

- **Target population.** Organizers may want to narrow their outreach so that conversations can focus on specific community issues. For example, the Youth and Police Initiative program in New Haven, Connecticut, wanted to make sure that police and youth participants would see one another after the conclusion of the dialogue to continue building relationships, so participants were limited to young people living in certain public housing buildings and the officers who worked there. The Students Talking it Over with Police program targets student leaders with the goal of demonstrating to other teens that talking to police is worthwhile. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration dialogue focused on examining how the community can collaborate with the justice system to reduce the number of youth of color with behavioral health disorders entering the justice system. As such, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration invited youth of color with lived experiences to serve as the voice of this population. In general, if the participants in the dialogue do not reflect the community demographics, the reasons for this should be stated clearly at the beginning of the recruitment process.

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION INCENTIVES

**Young people suggested the following incentives to offer potential participants in dialogues as part of the recruitment process:**

- **Food (including food served during the dialogue and discounts at local restaurants for participating)**
- **Volunteer hours**
- **School credit**
- **Money**
- **Tickets or passes to movies, sports, and local events**
- **Certification for completing the program**

- **Language.** If the target population includes young people for whom English is not a primary or first language, consider how their participation can be supported. For example, the Strategies for Youth, Inc. program serves many teens with limited English proficiency, and the program seeks out facilitators experienced in working with this population.
- **Safety.** If any concerns related to participants' safety have been raised in the planning process, including gang or crew affiliation, consider how to address this upfront during recruitment. Community partners can help to think strategically about safety issues, and many will have strategies in place to address these. For example, the Brownsville Community Justice Center in Brooklyn has youth who are engaged in its programs help orient newer young people, setting the tone that they are in a safe space where violence is not tolerated. Giving young people a shirt to wear with the program name is a non-confrontational way to ensure no one wears gang colors, and using a confidentiality pledge underscores the importance of not sharing information revealed during the dialogue.

## Recruiting youth participants

Once the characteristics of youth participants have been determined, the next step is to reach them. Going through community partner organizations that already have relationships with young people is a good place to start. Depending on whom the dialogue will be open to, it can help to reach out to specialized agencies that have relationships with specific populations; for example, organizations serving gay, lesbian and transgender youth, the Department of Probation, and cultural groups may be good resources for reaching a diverse pool of young people.

Community partners can help to reach prospective applicants. Many partners will share applications with young people engaged in their existing programming. If possible, dialogue organizers should coordinate with partners to give a presentation to potential

participants so they can answer potential participants' questions directly. This is the time to start framing the goals and anticipated outcomes of the conversation so that young people understand what will be expected of them as participants.

Young people are often more willing to participate when recruited through organizations with which they are already affiliated. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration used this strategy to recruit young participants for its dialogue—first reaching out to adults at relevant organizations and then asking those contacts to share the opportunity with young people who have personal interest in the dialogue topic. Going through a supportive adult gave the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration a better sense of the young person's background and availability. Further, upon acceptance of the invitation, it gave the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration an opportunity to build confidence in the young people prior to attending the dialogue.

Peer networks are another important recruitment tool. Promoting the dialogue on social media and encouraging teens to tell their friends is a good way to spread the word. Many young people said they would be more likely to participate if they could bring a friend. For more established programs, youth who have participated in previous dialogues can also help to share the opportunity.

Finally, young people said that offering incentives would help motivate them to sign up for dialogues. Consider incentives that will be meaningful for young people and that offer a tangible benefit. For example, young people who complete the Milwaukee Students Talking it Over with Police program receive a photo ID that they can show to officers if they are ever stopped. The program is so well known that this is a meaningful certificate, demonstrating to officers that young people have received training in how to interact with police.

## Reaching police participants

For a third-party organization planning a police-youth dialogue, developing a positive relationship with the police department is crucial. During the planning phase, reaching out to senior police officers will lay the groundwork for future conversations. Considering that the ultimate success of the dialogue often requires a change in behavior from officers, getting support from the department not just for holding the conversation but also for meaningfully incorporating what is learned from the conversations into practice is essential.

Start by making the case for the dialogue. Outline the benefits of the police department's participation in the dialogue—in particular, the prospect that improving community relations can have a host of crime-fighting benefits including enhanced victim and witness participation rates.

Most of the groups researched for this project had beat officers as dialogue participants. This allowed young people to interact with officers they were likely to see again outside of the conversation. A successful dialogue depends on having officers who participate because they want to improve relationships with young people in the community and not simply to boost a resume. Young people said that it was obvious to them when officers didn't want to be there, and several dialogue organizers told us that they could see a very different dynamic when police were willing participants. Some questions to consider when determining appropriate candidates include the following:

- **Timing.** At what point in an officer's career is a conversation like this most valuable? Houston's Youth Police Advisory Council brings young people together with the chief of police to discuss current issues. In comparison, the Philadelphia Police Academy brings youth into the police academy so that all officers receive the benefit of a youth perspective before they start serving.

- **Incentives.** How can officers be enticed to participate? Like youth, officers respond to incentives. Emphasize the personal and professional benefits of participation, including a chance to know the community better and the possibility for ongoing work with young people. COPS Office Director Ronald L. Davis, former police chief of East Palo Alto, California, offered overtime hours for officers to spend time with young people in the community doing recreational activities. At the same time, incentives should not be of such value that officers are participating only to earn them.
- **Schedule and budget.** How can an officer's busy workday allow for participation in a police-youth dialogue? While there is not a single right answer to this question, making a strong case for the public safety benefits of police-youth dialogues to commanding officers is an important first step in encouraging dialogue participation to become part of their departmental priorities. Further funding may be available once dialogues are established and a case can be made for their benefits.



# Setting the Agenda

Police-youth dialogues generally seek to accomplish three things:

1. Establish how young people and police currently feel about each other.
2. Draw out concrete recommendations for how to improve relationships.
3. Develop actionable next steps.

From talking with community organizations and youth during recruitment, facilitators should have some ideas about what young people and police will want to discuss, as well as issues best avoided during the dialogue. The agenda will also be informed by the conversations held with key stakeholders, concerns specific to the community, and input from participants during preparation sessions.

## Goals for youth participants

In addition to the three general goals, the best police-youth dialogues help young people navigate interactions with the police and understand how police perceive them. Over the course of preparing, participating and debriefing, teen participants should come away with the following:

- Knowledge of their rights.
- Information on what to do if they are questioned by a police officer.
- Information on why they might be questioned by a police officer; in particular, young people should be made aware of the fact that most police stops are not personal—it's an officer doing his or her job.

- An understanding of system processes that can affect them; for example, in New York City, if a youth cannot produce personal identification at the request of an officer, it's likely she will be taken to the station until her identity can be confirmed. While young people may not think this is fair, and it is their right not to carry ID, understanding this policy can help them make more informed decisions.
- An understanding of what they can do if they feel an officer has acted unfairly.
- An understanding of what to expect if they call the police. When and how can they report something anonymously? What will happen if they implicate themselves?
- How external factors such as dress, tone of voice, reaction to an officer, and willingness to answer questions can contribute—fairly or not—to an officer's actions.
- How race may influence police-youth interactions.

The issue of race—including disparities within the justice system and discrimination on the street—is central in many dialogues. Young people should be able to ask questions about how race affects their relationship with police officers, and facilitators should be comfortable leading this discussion.

## Identifying outcomes

All organizing partners and dialogue participants should have a clear understanding of the expected outcomes of the dialogue. Decisions about outcomes will inform not only the agenda but also how participants are prepared and how the dialogue is facilitated.

Police-youth dialogues provide a unique, safe environment in which to discuss issues affecting police-teen relationships. As a result, personal information is often revealed during these conversations, and participants often discuss what they would like to see done differently. This can raise expectations for change; a common fear expressed by dialogue

participants during project site visits was that “nothing would change” after the conversation. One youth participant said that dialogues needed to focus more on strategy and how to change things: “We spend too much time talking about what we already know.” With coordination and a clear plan, real change becomes more likely.



# Working with Youth

One of the most important pieces of feedback project staff heard from young people participating in dialogues across the country is that they want and need to be taken seriously. Bringing police and young people into a room together is not enough. Without preparation, it's easy for young people and police to fall into the same dynamic that occurs on the street, with police asking questions and young people supplying what they believe to be the right answers. Facilitators can unconsciously contribute to this dynamic as well. It takes coaching on all sides, building trust with young people, and preparing the police to approach teens as equals to eliminate this dynamic.

In general, successful dialogues require a willingness to listen and to change behaviors on both sides. Young people appreciate hearing from police about why they act the way they do, particularly when their behavior seemed rude and unnecessary to teens on the street. In particular, role playing the part of police officers gives teens a taste of what it feels like to be in a high stress situation and the limits (imposed by

rules and regulations) officers face. These exercises help teens understand why police sometimes ask questions about where young people are coming from, what they are doing in a specific location, and who else they have seen in the area. Conversely, taking on youth roles in these situations helps officers understand young people's perspectives, including the confusion they often feel when questioned on the street and the defensiveness that can result.

Young people remember their interactions with the police. While for officers, any single encounter may not be memorable, for each young person an interaction with police can have long-lasting ramifications—for good and for bad. This is particularly true in high-crime and minority communities where young people may get stopped on multiple occasions. One New York teen described this phenomenon: "The reason [young people] get angry [is] because they got stopped often, like a couple times a week or something. And it's like, 'OK, I got stopped. OK, I got stopped again. Really? I got stopped again now?'"



**Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Police Chief Edward Flynn with participants in the Students Talking it Over with Police program.**







# Partnering with Police

Perhaps the single most important component of organizing a successful police-youth dialogue is securing the full support of the local police department. Support needs to come from all levels, from top brass down to the beat officers who are the participants in the dialogue. Securing this support is crucial to ensuring the dialogues are sustainable and that any lessons influence practice by the police department.

In some cities, dialogues were initiated by the chief of police. In Milwaukee, Chief Edward Flynn requested launching dialogues to improve police-teen communication. This led to the creation of the Students Talking it Over with Police program, which has been running since 2010. Flynn's support helped to ensure there was funding not only to conduct the program, but also to support an evaluation. Houston's Youth Police Advisory Council holds five discussions each year on pre-selected topics such as drug use and school bullying. When available, Chief Charles McClelland attends each meeting along with invited guest panelists as subject matter experts. Council members ask questions and express concerns related to the topic(s), and the youth council as a whole, along with the chief, weighs in.

Coordinating with a third-party organization can take much of the burden of planning off of the police department. In all cases, be up-front with police officers about the expected commitment they are taking on when they agree to be part of a police-youth dialogue, as time and budget concerns can be barriers to participation.

A central goal of police-youth dialogues is to communicate the concerns of young people in the community to police in a way that influences practice on the streets. Project staff identified several obstacles that can prevent this from happening.

## Challenge #1. Assumption of traditional roles

There is an implicit power that comes with wearing a badge. There is also power in being an adult. Both of these dynamics need to be addressed to have a meaningful back-and-forth between teens and police officers.

The challenge for young people may be a fear of speaking openly and honestly about their experiences out of concern that their honesty could get them into trouble. There may be other, more subtle worries, such as the fear of not being taken seriously or concerns that their stories might not be believed.

Police-youth dialogues also have to worry about cynicism on both sides of the aisle—officers and teens can often express a belief that nothing meaningful will change once the dialogue ends.

## Response to Challenge #1

A skilled facilitator can address the dynamics and set the tone for a respectful conversation. Meeting with all participants in advance of the dialogue and setting firm expectations about roles will set the tone for a conversation where all opinions are given equal weight. Ideally, this expectation should be set for officers as soon as they agree to participate. Young people can sense real engagement in a conversation and quickly identify officers who are participating for (what they perceive to be) the wrong reasons. As Sergeant Renee Forte of the New Haven Youth and Police Initiative phrased it, "We want officers to teach kids [that] you do something because you love it."

Officers who do not feel a genuine interest in continuing the dialogue should be allowed to opt out of the conversation, but this should be a last resort. By addressing officers who appear disengaged to find their concerns, a strong facilitator may be able to turn an obstacle into an opportunity. After all, it is often

those individuals who are most reluctant to participate that have the most important experiences to share. Reminding officers that an important outcome of the conversation is for young people to see them as whole people—men and woman with families and interests—can help encourage more openness from police.

## Challenge #2. Fostering an open dialogue

Both young people and police often enter the room with preconceived notions regarding one another. Sometimes these conceptions are grounded in real, painful experiences, whether it's a young person having a family member in the criminal justice system or an officer having been a victim of violence on the job. In order to break down these barriers and address these emotionally jarring situations, all dialogue participants need to feel supported.

## Response to Challenge #2

In addition to establishing a setting in which all participants are on equal footing, facilitators should come to the dialogue aware of sensitive issues that may arise—particularly around racial disparity and feelings of discrimination—and be comfortable addressing them. Setting a tone of respect from the beginning and establishing expectations around confidentiality both help to create a safe environment. Facilitators should have contact information for a social worker or a hotline that participants can call if anything comes up during the conversation that upsets them.

## Challenge #3. Sustainability

Although there is some emerging research on the subject, including data on the Students Talking it Over with Police program collected by researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, there is still little empirical research to tie police-youth dialogues to improved public safety outcomes. In an era of budget austerity, even robust and long-running programs are subject to cuts if dialogues are not able to document success.

## Response to Challenge #3

Conducting research on dialogues as they are implemented can be useful in arguing for their importance. Developing a short survey asking both police and youth to share their feelings and perceptions before and after the dialogue can provide valuable information about the impact of this work. Partnering with a local research institution, as the Students Talking it Over with Police program did, can provide robust data that will help to make the case for the continuation of this work. Further, once dialogues are up and running, sharing early results can help make the case for additional funding. For example, the Pennsylvania Disproportionate Minority Contact Youth/Law Enforcement Corporation receives state and federal funds to support regular panel discussions held between youth and police officers.

Working with a third-party facilitator can be a potential cost-saving measure for police departments, as not-for-profit organizations may have more flexible budgets and be able to better support these programs.

Finally, making sure that dialogues reach as many officers as possible, as opposed to inviting the same few officers to participate over and over, can help to institutionalize the practice. In Philadelphia, the police academy includes a dialogue with young people as part of basic training so all new officers have an understanding of how their interactions can affect teens.



# Facilitating the Dialogue

## Selecting a facilitator

A strong facilitator is crucial to a successful dialogue. Experience engaging young people is a must. Consider the population of participants and the specific needs of the community when selecting a facilitator. Knowledge about police-youth tension in the community, confidence in working with police officers, cultural competence, and experience working with nonnative English speakers are some of the skills that may be desirable in a facilitator. The facilitator needs to be prepared to work with young people who might be shy or nervous, have had negative experiences with the police, or are otherwise reticent to participate. At the same time, the facilitator must be comfortable providing police a platform to share their experiences while setting the expectation for officers to listen and reflect on the youth participants' stories.

Many programs opt to use a co-facilitation model. Having two people leading the discussion can help to keep the flow of the conversation going and simplifies the process of recording information.

If a police officer is used as the facilitator, advance consideration should be given to issues that might arise, including:

- **Power structure.** Having an officer in the front of the room reinforces the typical power dynamic that exists on the streets. Using role plays and activities that give young people time in front of the room can help to balance the dynamic.
- **Youth reluctance to share.** Young people may be less comfortable being open with a police officer than someone they view as neutral. One way that the Students Talking it Over with Police program deals with this issue is by holding an activity called "Four Corners" which enables youth to raise questions and concerns anonymously.

In this way, young people can safely bring up issues they might not feel comfortable raising in a conversation.

- **Training.** The role of facilitator requires a different approach and skill set than that of police officer. Training officers to fill this role successfully necessitates specific preparation and training. For example, the Students Talking it Over with Police program requires all would-be facilitators to attend a 40-hour training, which culminates with trainees facilitating a lesson from the program's curriculum (with youth participants, whenever possible). Since the program launched in 2010, more than 50 officers have participated in this training.

Group dynamics have the potential to lessen or increase the burden on the facilitator, and thinking these relationships through in advance is an important part of planning for the conversation. Bringing adults who are not police officers into the discussion can help move the conversation forward. This technique was used by the Youth Justice Board during the filming of *Talking it Through* and in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration dialogue. When sensitive issues arose during those conversations, particularly around how race affects relationships between young people and police, having adults of color in the room who could relate to and validate young people's experiences contributed to teens' willingness to discuss these issues.

## Preparation sessions

Holding separate preparation sessions with youth and with police allows facilitators to learn from each group what they think is most important to discuss during the dialogue, as well as any issues that are best to avoid for the time being. The groups should also be given the opportunity to express what ground

rules they would like to set to make sure the conversation goes well. Holding the preparation session with youth first allows for relevant information learned during that session to be brought into the preparation session with the police.

#### Youth preparation sessions

The youth preparation session should be held either immediately before the dialogue or in the days leading up to the conversation. There are four goals for the youth preparation session:

- 1. Meet and greet.** Meeting in advance gives youth participants the opportunity to get to know one another and address any internal tension that may exist within the group. If meeting in person is impractical, holding a preparatory phone call is another way to accomplish this goal.
- 2. Set the agenda.** Hearing from young people what they would like to gain from the dialogue will help establish appropriate goals. Begin this conversation with a question such as “Describe one positive and one negative interaction you have had with police officers.”
- 3. Set expectations.** Create a set of expectations about behavior during the dialogue. Make it clear to young people that these expectations will be the same for all participants and that they will not be asked to do anything police won’t also be expected to do. These expectations should include the following:
  - **Confidentiality.** While at the end of the conversation, the group may agree to share some of the takeaways from the conversation with the community, the specifics of the conversation—particularly who said what—should not be shared outside of the room. Facilitators may want to use a confidentiality pledge that everyone signs or verbally agrees to as a way to emphasize the importance of this expectation. If photographs will be taken, discuss how they will be used. Young people who do not want to be photographed should still be able to participate.

- **Exceptions to confidentiality.** Police officers and youth workers are designated mandated reporters in most states. Any exceptions to confidentiality stemming from this obligation should be clarified in advance of the conversation by the facilitator.
- **Participation.** Present the dialogue as a unique opportunity. Ask young people what would help them to speak candidly and what would discourage their participation. Part of showing respect to all participants is making sure only one person speaks at a time.
- **Agree on how to disagree.** Acknowledging up front that the conversation may at times be difficult is an important part of setting expectations for young participants. They should know that even if an officer says something they do not agree with, the officer is in the room because he or she cares and wants to improve relationships.
- **Use of cell phones.** Phones should be off and put away throughout the dialogue. In a true emergency, calls should be taken outside of the room.
- **Level of formality.** Determine in advance, through conversations with the police department and community partners, the level of formality of the conversation, and prepare young people for that. This includes consideration of appropriate attire for youth and police, use of titles versus first names, and the organization and setup of room. Some police-youth dialogues request that officers not wear their uniforms and encourage participants to call each other by first name. In some cases, this may not be possible. For example, host locations may have their own dress codes that should be followed, or officers may be required to wear their uniforms. At the Students Talking it Over with Police program, the uniform was part of a teaching tool. No matter what expectation is set, it’s important that young people know this going in so they are prepared.

- **Use of tools and technology.** If any tools will be used that young people are not familiar with (e.g., microphones), the preparation session is a good time to let them know this. If it's possible, allow youth to practice using this equipment in advance so they will feel confident on the day of the discussion.

**4. Confirm the hot topics.** Facilitators should use the prep session to confirm that the topics identified by planners resonate with the young people and address youth's feelings on contentious issues. Explain that a two-hour conversation might not allow adequate time for addressing contentious topics but by holding the dialogue, participants are building trust and a foundation to address these topics head-on in the future.

## Police preparation sessions

Meeting separately with police in advance of the conversation ensures that police are familiar with the other officers who will participate and helps set expectations as outlined above. Facilitators should also reinforce that all participants will be treated equally and held to the same standards.

Facilitators should keep in mind that officers may never have participated in a discussion like this before and plan accordingly. Further, facilitators should use this time to observe group dynamics: Who is most comfortable speaking? Is anyone reluctant to participate? Use this time to make sure everyone is equally engaged and comfortable. In addition to the recommendations provided in the previous section on preparing youth, the following are specific to preparing the police officers:

- **Set the agenda.** Share anticipated topics for the conversation and see if there are any additional topics they would like to discuss. Be sure to explain that the topics proposed originated from conversations with community organizations and young people. The facilitator should prepare officers for any sensitive issues that might arise or

any topics that will intentionally not be discussed during this conversation but may be returned to later.

- **Set expectations.** Prepare officers for the tone, structure, and expectations for the dialogue, highlighting how it may be very different from the interactions they typically have with youth. Emphasize that the traditional authority and power structure between adults and youth, and that of police officers and the public, will not be the expectation for the dialogue. If it has been established that participants will use first names and dress in plainclothes, it's possible some officers might be uncomfortable with the idea of not wearing a uniform or using their rank or their title. Facilitators should be prepared to talk about why this is important: to help young people feel like they are on equal footing and encourage their participation in the conversation. Facilitators can set the expectation with the group that, just as information will remain confidential to the group, young people should not address officers by their first name outside of the room as a sign of respect.
- **Prepare for adolescent behavior.** Research indicates that parts of the human brain, including those responsible for planning and impulse control, don't fully mature until people are in their 20s.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, typical teenage behaviors such as impulsivity, a lack of emotional self-regulation, and a lesser ability to make decisions while weighing potential future outcomes are a function of physical development. When adults understand developmentally normative adolescent behavior, they are better able to communicate effectively with teens, manage their expectations, and support teens as they mature and navigate challenging situations. Strategies for Youth Inc. offers officers

---

8. National Institute of Mental Health, *The Teen Brain: Still under Construction* (Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, 2011), [http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/teen-brain\\_141903.pdf](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/teen-brain_141903.pdf).

a training called “Policing the Teen Brain” that provides information and practical strategies for working with teenagers and young adults. Trainees in the Philadelphia Police Academy receive instruction in adolescent brain development as well as responding to trauma and gendered differences in behavior to prepare them for their interactions with young people on the streets.

## During the dialogue

### Setting the tone

- **Establishing goals.** The facilitator should state the goals of the dialogue upfront so that young people and police officers are on the same page. This process helps to reinforce why the conversation is taking place. It also is an early “win” for participants: coming to agreement around the goals is the first of hopefully many agreements the group will come to during the dialogue. Post the goals at the front of the room to keep the conversation focused.
  - **Parking lot.** Introducing a “parking lot” is a good way to keep track of issues that are raised but may not be directly related to the goals of the conversation. A large visual where these notes can be posted allows for the group to revisit them if there is extra time or return to them in future dialogues.
  - **Off-limit topics.** When introducing the goals, the facilitator should also remind the group if there are certain subjects that are not to be discussed and make sure that everyone agrees to this.
- **Expectations.** The facilitator should reinforce the expectations established during the separate group meetings. Asking the group what they think should happen if someone is not meeting expectations is a good way to establish equal footing and encourage self-governance.
- **Shared responsibility.** The purpose of the dialogue is for both sides to better understand each other and to think about their behavior during interactions with the other party. The dialogue will be most successful if there is a genuine willingness from all participants to change their approach when possible. Having police explain why they take certain actions that may make young people uncomfortable is important, but equally important is for officers to hear how young people perceive these actions and why they may respond in ways officers feel are inappropriate.
- **Expressing discomfort.** Establish a way for participants to express themselves if they are feeling shut out or unheard or if they are unready to move on. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration dialogue used a “fist of five” as a silent way for facilitators to check on how every individual in the group was feeling. It worked as a scale from zero to five, where holding up five fingers meant participants felt great and wanted the conversation to move ahead, three fingers indicated a neutral feeling, and zero fingers would block the conversation from going forward until an issue was resolved.
- **Equal treatment.** As much as possible, police officers and young people should be held to the same standards during the conversation. The facilitator may repeat and clarify points that are being made as the conversation progresses, but should be careful not to put words into anyone’s mouth or appear to favor any individuals—especially if the facilitator is a police officer. It’s also important for the facilitator to ensure everyone is able to contribute, going beyond the naturally outspoken people in the room who have the potential to dominate the conversation. Asking everyone in the room to answer a question, instituting a “nobody speaks twice until everyone speaks once” policy, and using breakout conversations are a few ways to make sure everyone is able to contribute.

## Facilitating the dialogue

- **Introductions.** At the beginning of the dialogue, have participants share something about themselves—where they live, what they like to do, and why they decided to participate. This is an easy way for the group to get to know one another and start to find common ground.
- **Icebreakers.** Police officers and young people can engage in an icebreaker unrelated to the substance of the dialogue before the conversation begins to encourage both groups to relax and connect. Something that has people on their feet and moving sets the tone for a fun and interactive session.
- **Documenting the conversation.** Make sure that participants are clear about what is being recorded and how it's being done. Facilitators for Boston's Strategies for Youth, Inc. program write everything down on a large board during the dialogue where youth can see it. The facilitator or designated note-taker should document all suggestions for improved practice.
- **Putting ideas into practice.** The facilitator should build questions into the dialogue that challenge participants to come up with strategies that can be used when young people and police are interacting with each other in their community to reduce tension and encourage them to use these strategies in their future interactions.

## Other activities

- **Role playing.** Role plays—especially reverse role plays where young people act as officers and vice versa—can help participants address challenging street interactions while having some fun. When playing officers, young people learn how difficult it can be to make quick decisions in fraught situations, while police playing young people get a taste of how intrusive questioning can feel. Role playing exercises can be strengthened by preparing each participant—in this case, the youth and the adult—in private. When they then act out the

scenario, they must respond to the unexpected, which more closely mimics real world situations. Role plays also provide opportunities for youth participants to be leaders in the front of the room and allow all participants to use creativity and problem-solving skills. Role plays were used in several police-youth dialogues researchers observed and were consistently highlighted as a favorite part of the day by youth and police.

- **Visual or drawing exercises.** Incorporating visual art into the dialogue allows participants to use a different set of skills, breaks up the structure of the dialogue, and can help young people express themselves—particularly those with limited English language proficiency. For example, during the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration dialogue, participants articulated changes they wanted to see in their communities. The facilitator sketched their ideas into a visual map that graphically conveyed ways to reduce disproportionate contact and arrest rates among youth of color with behavioral health challenges.
- **Shared experiences.** One way to launch a discussion is to have young people and officers share a common experience, then use this as a starting point to address larger issues. The *West Side Story Project* curriculum uses themes from the musical *West Side Story* to structure conversations about police-community relationships relevant to youth and police participants. For example, the song “Gee, Officer Krupke,” in which youth gang members explain to a police officer that they are misunderstood, is used as the basis for a discussion of participants’ experiences.
- **Games.** Creating a friendly competition is a good way to help participants learn while having fun. Strategies for Youth, Inc. uses a *Juvenile Justice Jeopardy* curriculum to teach young people how to navigate interactions with peers and police as well as understand the short- and long-term consequences of arrest and court involvement.

- **Introducing officers' equipment.** Giving the youth exposure to and experience with the resources available to officers can help them better understand the information and tools the police work with, along with the limitations they present. Participants in the Students Talking it Over with Police program listened to an actual 911 recording and were tasked with trying to decipher limited information about the suspect. This helped them understand that sometimes officers have very little information to work with and how this can lead to intensive questioning on the street. Officers also talked about items they always carry with them and their purposes, for example their identification badges.
- **Unstructured time.** Unstructured time can allow participants to connect with each other on their own terms. Preparing youth and police officers for this time during the prep sessions helps lead to better conversations. For example, ask police and young people to come to the dialogue with three questions for the other party in mind. Encourage police to take the lead in initiating conversations with young people who seem shy or concerned about approaching them. Rhonda McKitten, Director of Juvenile Grants and Policy at the Defender Association of Philadelphia, said that an unstructured shared meal between youth and police is a central part of panel discussions held regularly in Philadelphia. "Holding unscripted meals really cements everything we were talking about [during the panel]. It's when officers hand out their cards to kids."

#### Brainstorming next steps

At the end of the dialogue, facilitators should encourage participants to identify concrete changes that they can make in their interactions moving forward. For example, if a young person says that she is going

to "be nice" to officers encountered on the street, the facilitator should follow up by asking for examples of how she will do so. These ideas should be posted. To conclude the conversation, the facilitator should identify next steps:

- **Keeping the conversation going.** Devote time at the end of the dialogue to having young people and police officers brainstorm opportunities to continue the conversation and to include more participants in future dialogues, should there be any. Future discussion could also include any issues that were not fully explored during the initial dialogue.
- **Sharing other opportunities.** Many programs exist to bring young people and police together in some capacity, including the Police Athletic League and Explorers programs. Police can use the dialogue to make sure young people are aware of these opportunities and to get feedback on them. Young people can also invite police officers to their sporting events, school plays, and other activities.
- **Documentation.** Building on any next steps that were identified and documented during the conversation, the facilitator should help participants identify plans for follow up and assign appropriate individuals responsibility for enacting the next steps. Any action steps that the group is committing to should be reviewed, and anyone with responsibilities following the dialogue should articulate to the group what he or she is planning to do, when it will be done, and how it will be communicated back to the group, if appropriate.
- **Final thoughts.** To conclude, young people and police officers should each share something that they learned during the dialogue that they did not already know and something that they are committed to changing after the dialogue.





# After the Dialogue

If done properly, police-youth dialogues will be sessions that all participants value and review favorably. After the dialogue, the largest challenge is to translate this productive exchange of views into changed behavior on the streets. Depending on the goals identified during the planning process and the next steps and responsibilities identified during the dialogue, there are a variety of strategies to employ after the dialogue.

- **Soliciting feedback.** Either as a final component of the dialogue or immediately following in separate groups, it is a good idea to discuss what worked and what didn't to solicit participants' recommendations for future conversations. Asking participants to complete a short survey about their experience will help inform future dialogues.
- **Debriefing the police partners.** Communicate findings and recommendations to leadership within the police department. This is important after each dialogue but especially over time as multiple dialogues are held and consistent patterns can be discerned.
- **Summary report.** Draft and share a short summary about the dialogue and the proposed next steps to participants and, if applicable, members of the community at large. Consider other venues for sharing this information, such as police roll calls. Be sure that this document conforms to the expectations of confidentiality established at the beginning of the dialogue.
- **Tracking participation.** Dialogue organizers should keep track of both youth and police participants. Having a list of officers who have taken part in these conversations is useful for organizing future dialogues as these officers can help with recruitment by sharing their experiences. Keeping track of youth participants allows for follow up in the future. For example, the Youth and Police Initiative in Spokane keeps a database of youth participants' contact information and personal interests so that officers can stay in touch with opportunities relevant to individual teens.
- **Accountability.** Making sure that participants are following through with their commitments helps maximize the impact of the dialogue. The organization convening the dialogue, usually a community-based organization with strong ties to both teens and police, is often in the best position to take the lead in this area. For example, if dialogue participants agreed that police-teen relationships would be improved if police started interactions with youth by introducing themselves, a designated adult should check in about whether officers have kept up with this practice and how it's going. Similarly, if young people agreed on better methods for communicating with police, checking in with them on how this strategy is working and asking them to share this idea with their peers serves to remind them of their responsibility and supports knowledge-sharing. If possible, have the adult who facilitated the dialogue take the lead on follow-up.



Spokane (Washington) Police Chief Frank Straub with participants in the Youth and Police Initiative program.

- **Continuing the dialogue.** After sharing key take-aways with the partnering police department, discuss ways to establish more regular opportunities for young people and police to connect through future dialogues. Bringing in credible community organizations as partners and seeking sustainable funding can help lay the groundwork for institutionalizing police-youth dialogues.
- **Documenting results.** In localities where practices change as a result of the dialogue, documenting these changes and the reasons they were made bolsters the argument for continuing the dialogues. Including individual stories of how the dialogue impacted participants can help to strengthen the case as well and can provide insight about what can be gained from these conversations.



# Conclusion

Just as the approach to holding police-youth dialogues varies considerably from town to town, so do the results stemming from this work. Universally, though, dialogues offer a safe, supportive environment for teens to express themselves, develop more positive feelings about law enforcement, and learn how to improve personal interactions with police officers. Police officers gain valuable insight about youth behavior and foster increased trust in their work. Police departments also report improved communication between officers and youth on the street, and dialogues have prompted officers to connect young people to career opportunities, including within law enforcement.

Police-youth dialogues are not, of course, a magic elixir capable of healing all wounds. But they can be a valuable piece of the puzzle, both for participants and the larger community. Their potential symbolic power

is enormous. If done right, police-youth dialogues send the message that we are all in this together, and that everyone has a stake in improving public safety and treating each individual with dignity and respect.

These kinds of results are particularly important in light of current controversies. We are living through a moment of heightened awareness of police-community relations. Events in Missouri, New York, and elsewhere have highlighted deep levels of distrust with police, particularly among young people and communities of color. Bridging this divide has become a national priority.

Away from the spotlight, police-youth dialogue projects around the country are providing meaningful opportunities to discuss tensions, debunk myths and misconceptions, and forge greater mutual understanding.





# Site Visits

Project staff conducted site visits between February and November 2013. Project staff worked with advisory board members to select sites that have well-established police-youth dialogue programs and use unique and diverse approaches. Contact sites directly for more information.

## **Milwaukee Police Department (Milwaukee, WI)**

**Program name:** Students Talking it Over with Police

**Contact:** William Singleton, Officer

**Phone:** 414-935-7927

**E-mail:** [wsingl@milwaukee.gov](mailto:wsingl@milwaukee.gov)

**Website:** [stopbash.com](http://stopbash.com)

## **North American Family Institute (New Haven, CT)**

**Program name:** Youth and Police Initiative

**Contact:** Paul Lewis, Director of Training

**Phone:** 617-833-2598

**E-mail:** [paullewis@nafi.com](mailto:paullewis@nafi.com)

**Website:** [nafiyouthlink.org](http://nafiyouthlink.org)

## **Philadelphia Police Academy (Philadelphia, PA)**

**Contact:** George Mosee, Deputy District Attorney, Philadelphia District Attorney's Office

**Phone:** 215-686-6302

**E-mail:** [george.mosee@phila.gov](mailto:george.mosee@phila.gov)

**Website:** [padmc.org](http://padmc.org)

## **Phoenix House (Brooklyn, NY)**

**Program name:** West Side Story Project

**Contact:** Amy Singer, Senior Vice President, Business Development & Public/Private Partnerships

**Phone:** 646-505-2161

**E-mail:** [asinger@phoenixhouse.org](mailto:asinger@phoenixhouse.org)

**Website:** [phoenixhouse.org](http://phoenixhouse.org)

## **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Rockville, MD)**

**Program name:** "Engaging and Educating the Community in Preventing Youth of Color with Behavioral Health Conditions from Entering the Legal Justice System" dialogue

**Contact:** Ammie Bonsu, Public Health Analyst

**Phone:** 240-276-2405

**E-mail:** [ammie.bonsu@samhsa.hhs.gov](mailto:ammie.bonsu@samhsa.hhs.gov)

**Website:** [samhsa.gov](http://samhsa.gov)

## **Youth Police Advisory Council (Houston, TX)**

**Contact:** Rhonda Collins-Byrd, Youth Police Advisory Council Program Coordinator

**Phone:** 713-308-3292

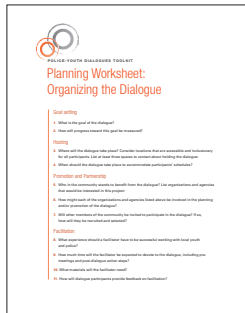
**E-mail:** [Rhonda.Collins-Byrd@houstonpolice.org](mailto:Rhonda.Collins-Byrd@houstonpolice.org)

**Website:** [houstontx.gov/police/vip/ypac.htm](http://houstontx.gov/police/vip/ypac.htm)





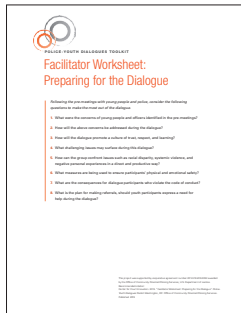
# Collateral Documents for Download



## Planning Worksheet: Organizing the Dialogue

This checklist helps planners clarify goals, partners, and logistics to ensure adequate support for the dialogue before beginning the planning process.

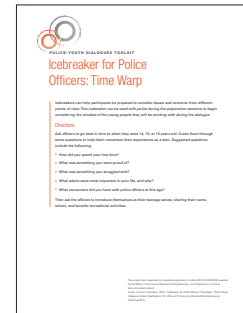
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0776>



## Facilitator Worksheet: Preparing for the Dialogue

Facilitators should consider these clarifying questions between their pre-dialogue meetings with police officers and young people and the dialogue itself.

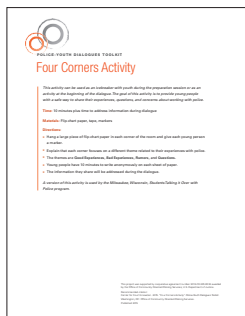
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0778>



## Icebreaker for Police Officers: Time Warp

This exercise can help law enforcement officers as they begin considering the mindset of the young people they will be working with during the dialogue.

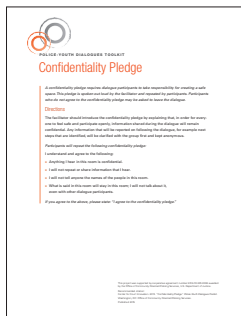
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0780>



## Four Corners Activity

This activity provides young people with a safe way to share their experiences, questions, and concerns about working with law enforcement. It is based on an activity used by the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Students Talking it Over with Police (STOP) program.

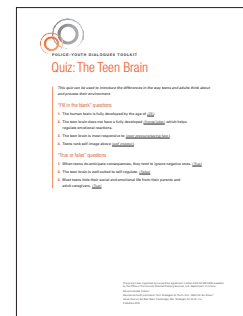
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0777>



## Confidentiality Pledge

Participants in police-youth dialogues have the responsibility for creating a safe space. This confidentiality pledge or one like it should be presented by the facilitator and agreed to by all participants.

<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0779>



## Quiz: The Teen Brain

This quiz can be used to introduce the differences in the way teens and adults think about and process their environment.

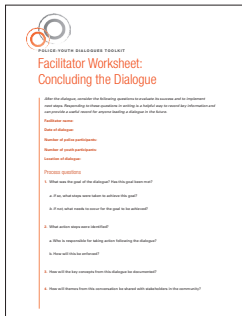
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0781>



### Dialogue Prompts

These questions are samples for dialogue facilitators to draw from and adapt.

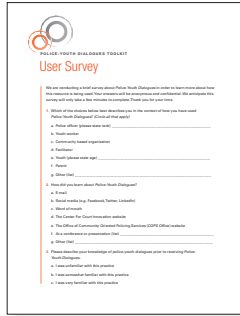
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0782>



### Facilitator Worksheet: Concluding the Dialogue

It can be helpful for the facilitator to consider these follow-up questions to record key information about the dialogue and provide a useful record for those leading dialogues in the future.

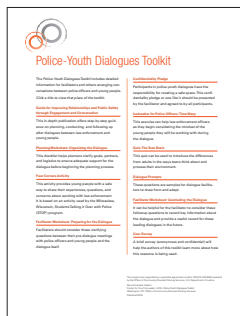
<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0783>



### User Survey

A brief survey (anonymous and confidential) will help the authors of this toolkit learn more about how this resource is being used.

<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0784>



### Police-Youth Dialogues Toolkit

Interactive list of *Police-Youth Dialogues Toolkit* pieces.

<http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0775>





# About the Center for Court Innovation

The Center for Court Innovation seeks to help create a more effective and humane justice system by designing and implementing operating programs, performing original research, and providing reformers around the world with the tools they need to launch new strategies.

Founded as a public/private partnership between the New York State Unified Court System and the Fund for the City of New York, the center creates operating programs to test new ideas and solve problems. The center's projects include community-based violence prevention projects, alternatives to incarceration, re-entry initiatives, court-based programs that seek to promote positive individual and family change, and many others.

The center disseminates the lessons learned from innovative programs, helping justice reformers around the world launch new initiatives. The center also performs original research evaluating innovative programs to determine what works (and what doesn't).

The Center for Court Innovation grew out of a single experiment; the Midtown Community Court was created in 1993 to address low-level offending around Times Square. The project's success in reducing both crime and incarceration led the court's planners, with the support of New York State's chief judge, to establish the Center for Court Innovation to serve as an ongoing engine for justice reform in New York.

The center has received numerous awards for its efforts, including the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-Profit Innovation, the Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University and the Ford Foundation, and the Prize for Public Sector Innovation from the Citizens Budget Commission.

For more information, please visit [www.courtinnovation.org](http://www.courtinnovation.org).



# About the COPS Office

**The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.

Rather than simply responding to crimes once they have been committed, community policing concentrates on preventing crime and eliminating the atmosphere of fear it creates. Earning the trust of the community and making those individuals stakeholders in their own safety enables law enforcement to better understand and address both the needs of the community and the factors that contribute to crime.

The COPS Office awards grants to state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies to hire and train community policing professionals, acquire and deploy cutting-edge crime fighting technologies, and develop and test innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders and all levels of law enforcement. The COPS Office has produced and compiled a broad range of information resources that can help law

enforcement better address specific crime and operational issues, and help community leaders better understand how to work cooperatively with their law enforcement agency to reduce crime.

- Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing.
- To date, the COPS Office has funded approximately 125,000 additional officers to more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country in small and large jurisdictions alike.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than 8.57 million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs.

COPS Office resources, covering a wide breadth of community policing topics—from school and campus safety to gang violence—are available, at no cost, through its online Resource Center at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov). This easy-to-navigate website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.



The challenge of improving relationships between police and teenagers can feel intractable. Young people often associate police only with punishment, while officers may approach young people in ways that contribute to anxiety, even with the best intentions. If youth and police encounter one another solely on the street, this dynamic is difficult to change. This *Police-Youth Dialogues Toolkit* presents a different way. Police-youth dialogues are facilitated conversations that build trust and understanding by allowing teens and police to speak honestly about their experiences with one another. These dialogues provide windows into the other's point of view, enabling participants to find common ground. The Center for Court Innovation and the U.S. Department of Justice COPS Office developed this toolkit as a resource for communities that wish to implement police-youth dialogues. Drawing from projects across the country that use dialogues, the toolkit consolidates expertise, providing strategies and promising practices.



**COPS**

Community Oriented Policing Services  
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Department of Justice  
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services  
145 N Street NE  
Washington, DC 20530

To obtain details about COPS Office programs, call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).

CENTER  
FOR  
COURT  
INNOVATION

Center for Court Innovation  
520 8th Avenue, 18th Floor  
New York, NY 10018

To obtain details about Center for Court Innovation programs, call the New York office at 646-386-3100.

Visit the Center for Court Innovation online at [www.courtinnovation.org](http://www.courtinnovation.org).