

# Building Connections Between Police and Communities of Color

Research Brief

Prepared at the Request of New York County Leaders  
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## THE PROBLEM

Police departments and communities of colors have a relationship fraught with mistrust over experiences of unjust treatment by law enforcement and the broader criminal justice system.

### Lack of Trust in Police

Significant disparities exist between Black and white Americans on their perceptions of police and whether they are doing an “excellent” or “good” job in the following areas:<sup>1</sup>

	Percent of People Ranking Police as “Excellent” or “Good”		
	Using the Right Amount of Force	Treating Racial/Ethnic Groups Equally	Holding Officers Accountable
Black Americans	<b>33%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>31%</b>
White Americans	<b>75%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>70%</b>

### Worsening Community Relations

Police officers report very different experiences working with their communities depending on the demographics of the people they serve:<sup>2</sup>

**58%**

Share of officers who said relations between their department and **Black people** in their community were “excellent” or “good”

Share of officers who said relations between their department and **White people** in their community were “excellent” or “good”

**91%**

The disparity is similar for Asians (88%) and Hispanics (70%). Black officers were also more likely than others to report that relations with communities of color were “only fair” or “poor”.

### Increasing Difficulty of Law Enforcement

An overwhelming majority of officers (86%) reported that high-profile fatal encounters between Black people and the police have made their jobs harder, with these incidents:<sup>3</sup>

- Making their colleagues more worried about safety.
- Increasing tensions between police departments and Black communities.
- Leaving officers reluctant to use force when appropriate or question suspicious people.

# PROMISING APPROACHES

While the tensions between police and communities of color cannot be easily solved, there are several potential options for communities to consider in addressing these tensions.

## Community Connections

A distinct approach for creating change comes in the form of a developing community-led (rather than police-centered) initiative: **congregational social workers**.<sup>4</sup> In many communities of color across the country, and especially Black communities, churches play a vital part in supporting community members and bridging gaps between neighborhoods and stakeholders. Social workers working through faith-based institutions can serve many roles, including:

	Consultancy	Resource Management	Education
Roles	Direct service; facilitation; planning; mentorship	Advocate; mediator; activist; catalyst	Teacher; trainer; outreach coordinator; scholar
Strategies	Active listening; community support groups; connecting community members to services (e.g., counseling); facilitating dialogue with local police and other stakeholders	Basic case management; forming community coalitions and organizing volunteers; leading peaceful protests; building long-term working partnerships with police	Educate community members on reducing police brutality; train volunteers in <b>trauma-informed care (TIC)</b> ; conduct workshops with police; work with colleges and other stakeholders to research and propose reforms

*Note: the roles and strategies listed above are arranged from least to greatest level of involvement.*

## Evidence-Based Policing

A new body of research that has emerged in recent years calls for implementing possible workforce reforms (see below) under a framework of **evidence-based policing**.<sup>5</sup> This perspective argues that these reforms should be deployed alongside:

1. **Comprehensive data collection** – to measure the impact of any given reform accurately and efficiently.
2. **Advanced, independent data analysis** – to guarantee transparency and accountability in determining the success of a given reform.
3. **A commitment to department-wide change** – to ensure that should a given reform be empirically proven to be effective, that policy will be permanently implemented.

## Workforce Reform

A literature review using the Seattle Police Department identified five major law enforcement policies that were effective (along with a dozen more policies that were promising, need more research, or do not work). Note: these may or may not work outside of Seattle:<sup>6</sup>

Policy Name	What It Does	How It Works
<b>Hot spots policing</b>	Reduces crime and disorder	Focusing patrols and adopting situational policing on small units of geography (e.g., blocks) with high crime rates.
<b>Problem-oriented policing</b>	Reduces crime and disorder	Proactively investing resources into addressing root causes of crime (e.g., poverty) rather than reactively responding to crimes as individual, unconnected events.
<b>Focused deterrence strategies</b>	Reduces gang and drug market violence	Focusing on frequent, repeat offenders (e.g., gang members) instead of first-time offenders; conducted via both hard levers (e.g., threats to arrest an entire gang) and soft levers (e.g., providing incentives to cease violence).
<b>Directed patrol for gun violence</b>	Reduces gun violence	Assigning officers to units of geography (e.g., neighborhoods) with high gun violence and enabling them to focus on proactive investigation and enforcement.
<b>DNA for police investigations</b>	Clears more property crimes	Utilizing DNA in property crimes (e.g., burglary) similarly to its use in homicide and sexual assault cases to more efficiently identify and arrest/clear suspects.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A popular approach to reducing fatal encounters with police is diversifying the police force to increase racial and ethnic representation among police officers. One study of 1,988 local police agencies from 2013 to 2018 found **that ensuring the racial and ethnic makeup of a police force reflects their community may lower police killings of people of color.**

Police departments have also attempted a range of additional reforms and programs to build connections with their communities:<sup>7</sup>

- Broadening the list of circumstances that require the sole use of non-lethal weapons.
- "Coffee with a cop" and "pizza with the police" programs to allow community members to meet and interact with off-duty officers.
- "Ride with a cop" and "Citizens Police Academy" initiatives to educate community members about the services that are (and are not) provided by police officers.
- Holding police-community forums for community members to voice concerns directly to law enforcement administrators.

**Note: the approaches listed on this page were studied in the general population, and more research needs to be done to understand their effectiveness and communities of color.**

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## METHODS

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Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as a review of research and findings from non-partisan think tanks, foundations, and organizations. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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## REFERENCES

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