

PUBLIC AGENDA

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,
Always in the Public Interest*



Improving Police/Community Relations

A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

***FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS,
CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND
INDIVIDUALS***

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A Note on Public Agenda's Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways--they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides (and, when available, their video counterparts) as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda's approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, "beyond the usual suspects"
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on "Public Engagement."

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Improving police-community relations: What's the best approach?

Introduction

It seems to be a reality of modern urban life that, from time to time, tensions can develop between law enforcement and community members or groups. Given this reality, it is worth doing some thinking about the best ways to prevent these tensions from developing in the first place, and of resolving them when they do.

To help you and your neighbors begin talking about this issue, we've developed a framework that offers three contrasting approaches to improving police-community relations. Which makes the most sense for this community—and why?

Approach 1: Improve Police Accountability

According to this approach, whether it's by a few bad apples or reflects a more systemic problem in a police department, much of the tensions that occur between police and the community come about because of inappropriate police behavior. That being the case, the most important way to help ensure good relations is by having strong accountability measures that enforce proper and professional police conduct. Doing so will help prevent police behaviors that can provoke problems with the community, or promptly identify and address them if they do occur.

Therefore we should:

- Create clear policies about things like racial profiling and car stops.
- Keep careful and systematic records to determine what is actually happening on the streets.
- Put a strong civilian review board in place, so appointed or elected citizens can help investigate and resolve problems that develop.

Those who like this approach say, "Strong accountability can go a long way towards preventing problems that develop between the police and the community."

But those who disagree say, "These traditional accountability measures have been around a long time and still too many problems remain."



Approach 2: Increase Mutual Understanding

According to this approach, many problems could be avoided, or more easily resolved, if the police better understood the different cultural groups in today's diverse communities. Likewise, community members need to better understand the nature of police work, including the risks and challenges officers face in their jobs every day, and the reasons for the procedures they use in their work.

Therefore we should:

- Train police in the best ways to interact with the many cultures they come into contact with in today's diverse society. Hiring more minority policemen or requiring officers to live in the cities where they work might also be effective ways to increase understanding of the community by the police.
- Educate citizens about the risks, challenges and procedures of police work through school programs, community liaison officers and television and newspaper specials.
- Create opportunities for more contact and dialogue between police and community members through citizen watch organizations and well-designed community meetings that allow for the constructive exchange of views.

Those who like this approach say, "The community and the police need to understand each other better if they're going to avoid the tensions that make things harder for citizens the police alike."

But those who disagree say, "The best way for the police to have good community relations is to do a professional, effective job fighting crime, and that's what they should be concentrating on."



Approach 3: Build Healthier Communities

This perspective recognizes that police can sometimes unnecessarily create problems with community members and groups. But it also recognizes that in communities where there is a lot of crime and instability, there will be a lot more police activity, and in that environment tensions between the police and community groups are virtually inevitable. A great deal of police-community tensions can be avoided if communities take more responsibility for themselves, and transform themselves into healthier, more stable places to live that are less plagued by crime.

This means community members themselves, along with political leaders and other community actors, should work to:

- Revitalize the economy of poor neighborhoods.
- Create more structure and hope for young people by improving their schools and making sure they're supervised and have constructive ways to occupy their time when they're not in school.
- Improve the quality of life by cleaning up parks or organizing citizen watch organizations that make the streets safer.

Those who like this approach say, "Strong, healthy neighborhoods are as much a key to improving relations with the police as anything else."

But those who disagree say, "We can't wait until neighborhoods transform themselves—who knows how long that will take? We need to do things to ensure better police-community relations *now*."



Using the guide in a community conversation, discussion group or classroom setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a choicework dialogue, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today's conversation?
3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today's conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?

