

Steps for Working on Police-Community Relations – Where do we Start?

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In this shared blog post, Cate and John offer our thoughts on the recent and **highly publicized**

violence between police and residents, and the related protests in communities across the country. Some passages are individually identified, with Cate focusing on the depth of structural racism and the kind of education needed. John notes some particular outreach and dialogue efforts (as does Cate).

We want to hear from people about their communities

- What is happening?
- Is it working?
- Are there tips or lessons to transfer about protest, engagement, and community policing policies?

[President Obama spoke](#) at the Democratic National Convention last week, and he mentioned more than once the ongoing violence between people of color and police that we are experiencing almost every day in our country:

“...we can work through racial divides in this country when we realize the worry black parents feel when their son leaves the house isn't so different than what a brave cop's family feels when he puts on the blue and goes to work, that we can honor police and treat every community fairly. We can do that... acknowledging problems that have festered for decades isn't making race relations worse, it's creating the possibility for people of goodwill to join and make things better.”

There seems wave upon wave of high profile incidents of violence between people of color and police, followed by simultaneous outrage toward and defense of police officers. We see many communities, including our own (Durham), engaged in protests about use of force and demonstrations of support for law enforcement. It can be complex and confusing, and difficult to know where the truth lies. As President Obama alluded to above, community mobilization and action are key parts of seeking fair and equal policing.

John offers: A reminder of a Charlotte initiative and some general guidelines for outreach



Specifics in Charlotte: In the blog post, [Impacting the Community One Haircut at a Time](#) Traci Ethridge reported on a “Cops and Barbers” initiative for building understanding and working on trust between Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department and community members.

General guidance: I will highlight [a few points from Everyday Democracy](#) to see if they ring true. [Everyday Democracy](#) supports community conversations and joint action on many topics, including partnering with diverse coalitions for large-scale dia



logue and change processes to address community-police relations.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula. Based on their 25 years of work, they offer some strategies to create positive change in community-police relations. Of the four guidelines

Everyday Democracy identifies, I'll highlight two:

- Address the history of mistrust and disconnection between the community and the police
- Link dialogue to action and community change

Address the history of mistrust and disconnection between the community and the police

What makes community-police relations so hard, in my view, is as Everyday Democracy writes: "Tragic incidents don't happen in a vacuum – there are hundreds of years of history and policies that have shaped our communities today." The different viewpoints on respecting and trusting police, on past and current racism, and how stereotypes operate, make conversations really hard.

Cate continues:

I made a case for anti-racism training in an [earlier post](#) on this blog, and I think it's an essential piece of the conversation about police and community relations. Durham's chief district judge, [Marcia Morey](#), shared context that is central to this conversation in an [editorial](#) in the *News and Observer* last week about her recent experience at the [Racial Equity Institute](#):

We were told that "race" is a social construct, not a biological one... This historic approach to labeling people by race promoted categories by which our society could devise special privileges and benefits for some and not for others, simply based on skin pigment.

It happened in 1705 with a Virginia statute that gave white indentured servants 50 acres, 50 bushels and a musket, but nothing to blacks. For the next 200 years, a Civil War, Jim Crow laws, statutes, policies and court decisions denied blacks equal opportunity in housing, education, healthcare and justice.

Racial inequity is not simply a black person's problem, nor a white person's ignorance. It's a systemic issue that permeates all aspects of our society, especially the criminal justice system and particularly law enforcement who are on the front line of heightened tensions.

In the editorial, Judge Morey calls for true understanding of the experience of others as a path toward healing. I would offer that, because of the deep history of racism in our country, representatives of the criminal justice system can take a step toward that understanding by **further educating themselves on structural racism**. Communities of color may be more willing to engage with police officers if they see steps being taken to understand the inequities that have led to the current climate of mistrust.

Cate and John:

[Link dialogue to action and community change](#)



We think there was widespread compassion for [Dallas Police Chief David Brown when he said](#):

“We’re hurting. Our profession is hurting. Dallas officers are hurting. We are heartbroken. There are no words to describe the atrocity that occurred to our city. All I know is that this must stop — this divisiveness between our police and our citizens.” Here is a [video of his comments](#).

Cate continues:

There is no doubt that the divisiveness must stop, but linking that desire to action is where I think we fall short.

Many folks may believe that “talk is empty” without a clear goal for action.

Organizers of committees, forums and other ways to address community-police relations need to be clear what is “on the table” for action following initial conversation. There is a heavy tension between a view that community conversation is meant to figure out what to do make community-police relations better, versus meant to spark the kind of clear action – near-term and concrete – that many community leaders seek in order to start to rebuild trust with their law enforcement leaders and officers.

NPR covered a [story](#) about a recent Wichita, Kansas [Black Lives Matters](#) protest that changed course following a conversation between protest organizers and police. The protest was canceled after the chief of police met with Black Lives Matters activists, and instead, the groups co-hosted a [First Steps Community Cookout](#) to begin bridging the gap between police and the communities they serve. Like many communities on the morning after [National Night Out](#) events and cook outs, I imagine that many in Wichita are watching to see what additional steps will be taken to continue

the conversation and make concrete changes to improve relationships and ways of working among police and the communities they serve.

Cate and John:

So, in addition to Cops and Barbers in Charlotte, First Steps in Wichita, and guidelines from Everyday Democracy, **what do you see that is making some headway on perceptions and practices to improve community-police relations?**