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# Building Relationships of Trust

Curriculum  
Training  
Modules



**COPS**  
*Community Oriented Policing Services*  
U.S. Department of Justice

**IIR**  
Institute for Intergovernmental Research



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Robert Wasserman. 2013. *Building Relationships of Trust: Curriculum Training Modules*. Tallahassee, FL: Institute for Intergovernmental Research.

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Approximate teaching time: 3 hours

# Overview of Key Concepts

## Goals

This module incorporates three general learning goals:

1. Educating students on the concepts of building relationships of trust and their importance for police legitimacy and crime reduction in the community
2. Informing students about best practices for building relationships of trust for line officers and community oriented policing specialists
3. Outlining potential challenges for building relationships of trust programs and ways those challenges can be overcome

## Learning Objectives

Upon completing this course, students will be able to do the following:

- ◀ Define building relationships of trust, and explain how it relates to crime prevention and control and community oriented policing.
- ◀ Describe individual officer and departmental actions that will help facilitate trusting relationships with community members and leaders.
- ◀ Identify potential challenges that can inhibit building relationships of trust, and describe how to respond to those challenges while not exacerbating them.





# Description of Content

## What is building relationships of trust?

- ◀ This initiative focuses on developing relationships of trust between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve so that agencies can better conduct crime control and prevention.
- ◀ For nonsupervisory line officers, building relationships of trust means reaching out to community leaders and members, responding to community concerns, and approaching the community's cultural practices with sensitivity and respect.
- ◀ An agency can measure the success of building relationships of trust by the degree to which the community views the police agency as having legitimacy: i.e., that ordinary citizens feel that the police have a right to police beyond the fact that the law grants law enforcement agencies policing powers, considering the law does not ensure that ordinary citizens will trust these agencies with promoting community safety. Community members will view a police agency with legitimacy if they believe police officers are performing their duties lawfully, fairly, and in accordance with the community's best interests. Community members are often far more concerned with "procedural justice," reflecting how the criminal justice system treats people, than with the actual outcome of an event. Well-executed building relationships of trust policing strategies will inherently help foster legitimacy, but some degree of legitimacy is also a prerequisite to starting a building relationships of trust initiative.

## Why is building relationships of trust important for crime prevention and control?

- ◀ Community members know best what is happening in their community; thus, building relationships of trust helps law enforcement to learn what's really happening in the communities they serve.
- ◀ Building relationships of trust between community members and law enforcement increases the likelihood that the community will come to officers when they have issues of concern pertaining to community threats and suspicious behavior relating to crime. These relationships also increase the likelihood that community members will share law enforcement's concerns (such as those relating to crime prevention and control). Also, widespread recognition that law enforcement genuinely wants to help all communities might itself counter gang or group engagement in violence or other crime. Last, relationships of trust are also social capital that law enforcement agencies can rely upon whenever issues arise that require community understanding and support.
- ◀ Building relationships of trust helps to reduce crime and build safe and secure communities. It incorporates best practices in community policing and may be the most effective means for law enforcement to create a moral voice in the community against crime and violence.



## Line officers implementing relationships of trust in the neighborhoods to which they are assigned can take the following proactive and responsive steps and consider certain sensitivities:

### ◀ Proactive steps

- **Create a “felt presence.”** When applicable, officers should approach neighborhood residents and make first contact. All officers should make a conscious effort to gain contacts within the neighborhood. They should engage in discussion and at minimum make eye contact with the people officers pass on patrol as opposed to talking only with their partners or moving through the community without acknowledging community members.
- **Know about the community.** Officers should seek to understand the nature of the community, its culture, and residents’ issues of concern so they can speak intelligently about those issues when engaging with the community and its leadership.
- **Know the language.** In areas where the community largely speaks another language, officers should try to learn key words and phrases. When speaking with a member of the community or the leadership, showing that officers care enough to try to speak the language shows respect for the culture and the community.
- **Maintain relationships and create new ones.** Officers—particularly in community policing functions—should review known relationships with community members and identify additional relationships that should be formed, both with those communities with which law



enforcement already has contact and with which it has little or no contact.

- **Encourage community participation.** In all actions, officers should remember that building relationships of trust relies on active community participation. Officers should encourage citizens to become and stay involved in community policing processes and civic life in their neighborhoods.

#### ◀ **Responsive steps**

- **Demonstrate diligence.** Officers should make a conscious effort to respond to the concerns of all residents. If officers do not have an answer to a resident's question, they should collect contact information and tell the resident that they will return promptly with an answer if possible (and do so); if they cannot find the answer, they should advise the resident of that fact.
- **Practice openness and transparency.** Officers should be transparent about building relationships of trust and about their objectives in neighborhoods because cooperation is built on information sharing. Officers should not become argumentative when citizens have complaints or concerns, even if the complaints or concerns are based on inaccurate perceptions or seem unfair. Officers should speak with community leaders before major police actions occur (when applicable). When such actions occur, officers should speak to community leaders before addressing the media.

#### ◀ **Sensitivity considerations**

- **Respect cultural differences.** Officers should always be aware that their actions in public will affect the reputation of law enforcement writ large in the eyes of much of the public. They should always be mindful and respectful of cultural differences of communities, such as following the customary practice of removing their shoes before entering mosques. In addition, officers should not require a person to remove clothing or items of religious significance except when absolutely necessary. Remember, efficacy in building relationships of trust and community policing generally depends on perceptions of legitimacy and procedural justice.
- **Show concern when reaching out.** By working with communities and earning their trust, officers will find that community members

will start to share information regarding who is involved in criminal activities in the area. When receiving such information, officers should show concern for the community's well-being. For community meetings, community input should set the agenda, and police representatives should not simply recite crime statistics in the area. When the community identifies problems, police officers should suggest what law enforcement can do about them and ask community members how they can take action as well.

- **Conduct intelligence gathering carefully.** Some police actions involve intelligence gathering in the community, either by surreptitiously collecting information from community members or via undercover officers who attend community or other meetings in the area. These activities can include using surveillance, using informants, or gathering information that community members might not intend to divulge. Officers should be aware that a conflict can arise when community members perceive police officers to be “spying” on community activities. Undercover intelligence activities should be authorized only when there is reasonable suspicion that an individual is engaged in illegal activity. If strong relationships of trust have been established with the community, police can better approach those they know and discuss the situation with them, asking that they try to address the situation without police intervention first.

#### ◀ **Reconcile the differences between the community outreach and intelligence gathering.**

- **Focus on community problem solving.** Showing the community that officers are committed to solving problems and issues of concern to the community will go a long way toward building trust. Officers should reinforce that the purpose of community outreach is to collaborate with the community in addressing these problems and issues, not collecting more information than the community already offers.
- **Separate an officer's outreach activities from the department's intelligence activities.** If the officer sees a conflict and a potential problem with the intelligence activities (i.e., they will destabilize established, positive relationships), discuss with supervisors how the department or officer can address that problem.



- **Raise constitutional issue with supervisors.** If the officer becomes aware that police intelligence activities are aimed at constitutionally protected activities, the officer should raise the issue with supervisors. Such activities can greatly damage existing relationships and eventually result in legal challenges to the department.
- **Share community contact and activity information with supervisors.** Officers should ensure that their supervisor is knowledgeable about their contacts and activities so that she or he and the department's command staff can identify and address any overlap between intelligence and building relationships of trust activities.

### **Agencies may experience some of the following challenges in implementing and sustaining building relationships of trust:**

- ◀ **Preexisting distrust of law enforcement**
  - Some communities have had divisive experiences, such as racial bias, with police in their neighborhoods.
  - Immigrant communities may fear police officers because they were commonly associated with government abuses in the immigrants' countries of origin.

- In immigrant communities with numerous undocumented individuals, people may fear that interaction with law enforcement—even as a part of community outreach programs—might result in deportation.
- Community members may fear retaliation from other neighborhood residents if they were to speak with police officers.

#### ◀ **Incidents and crises**

- Incidents and ensuing crises can damage police-community relations, even when strong relationships exist between police officers and community members. Crises can result from actions taken by officers of any department (even those who do not commonly interact with the members of a particular community) and from isolated incidents in which a police action results in unanticipated outcomes. The latter can be difficult for officers to avoid, considering the number of times they respond to situations every day, many of which may involve community members with whom officers are working to develop and maintain relationships of trust. Such incidents can include the following:
  - Perceptions of racial or ethnic bias or a lack of procedural justice and fairness in how the police treated people
  - Controversy or alleged improper conduct on the part of one or more community leaders with whom police have interacted as part of building relationships of trust initiatives
  - Perceptions of excessive use of force by police in handling a situation
- To make these relationships resilient during times of crisis, departments with strong ties to community members and leaders will have built up social capital.
- For these relationships to be resilient, agencies must maintain them over time and not rely on being able to establish them after a crisis. When a crisis occurs, advising community leadership about what has occurred increases leaders' trust in the police officers, who will then be seen as open and transparent.

## Agencies can implement some of the following strategies for addressing challenges:

- ◀ **Act after changes in working relationships.** A police agency and its community must rebuild their working relationships when police personnel retire or transfer and when community leaders move or are otherwise unable to continue their relationships with police officers.
- ◀ **Sustain contact.** Particularly in communities where many members do not trust law enforcement, expanded contact may be necessary to identify local problems, strengthen relationships, and assist in creating a sense among residents that police officers are problem solvers and want to help the community.
- ◀ **Formalize councils.** Councils, associations, or other organizations that bring together key community leaders and members help law enforcement to communicate important information about public safety to community members, to get an accurate and reliable sense of the community's issues of concern, and to reinforce that the police officers want to partner with residents to address their concerns. Police agencies can seek out councils interested in working with law enforcement or create their own advisory councils that are representative of the community. Advisory councils should meet regularly, have meeting agendas, and discuss more than police officers telling the community about crime trends and police activities. Councils should also eventually create succession plans for members, so that when officers get transferred or promoted, or neighborhood members of the council move or drop out, replacement officers assigned to the neighborhood and other members can maintain the effort.
- ◀ **Collaborate with the community.** Meetings with the community should identify priority problems and what police officers and the community can do toward problem solving. In a true partnership or collaborative effort, members of the council are equal. Discussions should focus on strategies and tactics that officers and citizens can employ to address problems. By involving the community as partners in identifying these strategies, the council will gain far greater community support for the effort, and the community will share responsibility for its success or failure.

- ◀ **Apply the “common thread theory.”** Coined by Deputy James Spurlock, Loudoun County (Virginia) Sheriff’s Office, the common thread theory refers to bridging gaps between law enforcement and communities by way of identifying issues of mutual concern. The community’s priorities often reflect quality-of-life issues, such as youth development, education, gangs, and drugs; thus, the issue of concern for entry into community discussion need not be just crime control or terrorism prevention. After law enforcement identifies a priority of the community, it then links police concerns to that issue, thus helping both sides to find common ground.

### **The “Guided Discussion” helps agencies reach out and respond to community concerns.**

- ◀ The “Guided Discussion” on page 11 is also a good learning activity and establishes one aspect of the design, development, and implementation deliverable for assessing/evaluating an agency’s building relationships of trust initiative.

# Guided Discussion: Reaching Out and Responding to Community Concerns

## Who are community leaders and why are they important?

- ◀ Community leaders are individuals whom community members accept as legitimate representatives of their community's best interests.
- ◀ Finding community leaders is key to effective building relationships of trust initiatives.
- ◀ Examples of community leaders might include the following:
  - Owners of prominent neighborhood businesses
  - Clergy
  - Activists
  - Heads of neighborhood associations, such as Business Improvement Districts
  - Heads of neighborhood charities
  - Heads of nonprofit advocacy organizations
  - Other leaders recommended by community members



## **Where can you find community leaders?**

- ◀ Community members who would make good leaders often own or run prominent neighborhood meeting locations, such as dining establishments or meeting halls. They usually lead prominent local establishments or organizations.
- ◀ The faith community often has well-recognized leaders, such as imams, priests, preachers or reverends, rabbis, etc.
- ◀ Activist groups and charities interact frequently with community leaders. Along with religious institutions, nonprofits are often the best starting points.

## **How do you know whether someone is a community leader?**

- ◀ Individuals who are widely accepted community leaders are known throughout their communities.
- ◀ They often head neighborhood groups, prominent businesses, associations, religious institutions, etc.
- ◀ They have the best interests of their communities at heart, and while they might differ from fellow neighborhood residents on some issues, their advocacy in the community is generally not divisive.

## **Is it best to let community leaders speak for members for efficiency's sake, or is it also necessary to consult other community members who are not in leadership roles?**

- ◀ It is also necessary to consult other community members who are not in leadership roles. Those members may not be engaged in community politics or police relations, but they may have important information they should share with police and should also be consulted on a periodic basis to ensure that initiatives enjoy genuine community-wide support. They also need to feel comfortable with law enforcement, which can be facilitated only through direct contact.
- ◀ Consult other community members to ensure the information relayed by leaders matches the community's understandings and opinions.



### **What should you do if community members are not receptive to police contact?**

- ◀ Officers should not treat reticence with suspicion or with reprimands; rather, officers should create trust by reassuring individuals that officers wish to help.
- ◀ Officers should provide their contact information, tell those initially hesitant to interact with the police to call with concerns, and assure these individuals that any concerns expressed will remain confidential.

### **What should you do if a community member is critical of your department or government services generally?**

- ◀ Officers should not be defensive.
- ◀ Officers should listen to what the individual has to say. If his or her complaint refers to specific police actions, refer the individual to the police department's complaint processes. If the individual is concerned about police policy in the neighborhood, officers should bring it to the attention of their supervisors and respond to the individual with an answer if appropriate.



## **How can patrol officers promote a “felt presence” in the neighborhood?**

- ◀ Officers should make eye contact and say “hello” to passers-by.
- ◀ Officers should stop in at neighborhood establishments to meet proprietors.
- ◀ When in a patrol car, officers should proceed slowly and with the windows down.
- ◀ Officers should not constantly converse with their partner while on patrol to the extent that residents feel uncomfortable interrupting them to have a conversation.
- ◀ Officers should not be afraid of casual conversations—all positive interaction facilitates trust.

## **How much time does it take to develop relationships of trust?**

- ◀ These efforts are often long term, taking months or years.
- ◀ Experience shows that police departments can attain real achievements in a short time with a strong commitment to transparency; sustained, meaningful contact with community leadership; and open and frank discussion.
- ◀ Different communities present different challenges; thus, the amount of time needed to develop relationships of trust can differ. Short-term initiatives have the most limited impact.

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## About the Institute for Intergovernmental Research

The Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR) is a Florida-based nonprofit corporation specializing in criminal justice, homeland security, and juvenile justice issues. IIR has a proven history of promoting greater efficiency and effectiveness among federal, state, local, and tribal criminal justice agencies through customized training, technical assistance, and research. Areas of special competence include criminal justice information sharing, privacy and civil liberties, violence reduction, Gang Resistance Education and Training, anti-gang initiatives, officer safety and wellness, anti-terrorism initiatives, criminal intelligence systems, homicide and narcotics investigations management, and information technology and multimedia development.

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## 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.
- ◀ By the end of FY2013, 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.
- ◀ As of 2013, the COPS Office has distributed more than 2 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 Web site is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

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