



The **Opportunity** Agenda

Moving Hearts, Minds, and Policy for Lasting Change

Talking Policing Issues

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A central goal of any community is the safety and security of its members. Police can play an important role in achieving this goal. But, like many aspects of our current criminal justice system, the role of law enforcement has been overemphasized, overfunded, and outsized to proportions that no longer serve the goal of community safety and security. We need to take a close look at the factors that really cause communities to feel safe and identify what's working and what's not. This means examining the role of police closely and talking to target audiences about what needs to change so that we can get closer to the goal of safety and security for everyone.

In a democracy, we have a special relationship and agreement with those people who police our communities. Communities need police to be accountable in the ways they serve and protect, to listen to community needs and recommendations, to hold officers accountable for wrongdoing and brutality, and to make the right judgment calls when events get heated or dangerous. In return, police need communities to invest in them and in their safety.

This agreement between communities and the police relies on a number of things to work: trust, respect, and a shared desire that people are treated fairly and equally, to begin with. But it also relies on thorough training, an understanding and respect of rights, policies that guide the people who comprise law enforcement toward the goals communities want policing to fulfill, and timely and meaningful consequences for officers and departments that don't advance those goals. When any of these pieces are missing, we can see a breakdown in relations between communities and police. And too many groups—people of color, young people, LGBTQ individuals, low income people, sex workers, and other communities in marginalized situations—bear the burden of this breakdown, finding their communities over- or abusively-policed and disrupted because of outdated and misguided policing strategies.

This memo offers ideas about starting the conversation about the role of police in our communities and how to direct decision makers toward the solutions that realize true safety and security for all communities.

Lead with a Positive Vision and Shared Values

Audiences connect with messages that reflect their values and articulate a better world. Outline a transformative vision of what safety really means to communities, and what we need to do to ensure all communities feel safe. Then work from there to describe what effective, accountable, and transparent policing looks like.

Start by reminding audiences what communities really need, beyond the enforcement of laws, to be safe. There are a number of important factors necessary to meeting this goal, ranging from community cohesiveness and economic stability to laws that protect people's rights and property. Police are part of the equation, but their role is often overemphasized at the expense of other equally or more important factors.

This vision can include what police should be doing more of but also what other public structures should take off their plate. For instance, while police should be thoroughly trained in mental health issues and how to work with people who are experiencing problems that impact public safety, police should not be, by default, the first interaction a person has with the mental health system. Other public structures, such as mental health, substance abuse, and homeless services, should be brought to scale so that the police are not expected or relied upon to play a role they are not qualified to play.

Some values to engage audiences in conversations about policing include:

- ▶ **Equal Justice** – the assurance that what you look like, the accent you have or how much money you make should not affect the treatment you receive in our justice system. Current disparities in the application of laws violate this value.
- ▶ **Our Founding Principles/The Constitution** – the Bill of Rights outlines important rights and ideals that we should strive to uphold. While we have often fallen short of these ideals, they should still guide how we treat people.
- ▶ **Basic Rights/Human Rights** – the guarantee of dignity and fairness we all deserve by virtue of our humanity.
- ▶ **Voice** – the idea that we should all have a say in the decisions that affect us and our communities.
- ▶ **Community** – the notion that we share responsibility for each other, and that opportunity is not only about personal success but about our success as a people.
- ▶ **Safety and Security** – we all want to live in communities where our family and property are safe. We should work toward communities where individuals also feel safe from the police and police feel safe while doing their jobs.

Describe the Problem: The role of police, as with many aspects of our criminal justice system, has been over-emphasized and outsized, putting too many responsibilities on police and underemphasizing other factors that increase community safety. As a result, many policing approaches do not align with the values and goals of the communities police are meant to serve.

- ▶ We need to examine the entire criminal justice system to identify where outdated approaches and laws lead to the overcriminalization of too many behaviors, rights violations, and decreased community safety and security. We then need to decide how police best fit into an improved system.
- ▶ Much of the current culture and many of the practices of law enforcement agencies are out of step with the communities they serve. What we see today is a severe breakdown of trust and legitimacy between the police and low-income communities of color. Instead of viewing the police as there to protect and serve, members of these communities often experience the police as there to harass, intimidate, and cause harm. Such a breakdown poses a threat to communication and public safety.
- ▶ The underlying strategy of aggressively deploying police to address every level of community disturbance or problem, including relatively minor, noncriminal infractions, produces policies that then translate into practices that are destructive of both trust and public safety.
- ▶ Police are expected to fulfill too many roles and address too many community issues including homelessness, substance abuse, school discipline, and issues related to mental health conditions.

Present Solutions: Updated police approaches that align with community needs and values.

- ▶ **Assign police the right responsibilities and limit negative contact.** Public safety is a broad charge, and police should be involved with and work on a wide range of issues. But they do not need to be the leaders and certainly shouldn't be the main representatives to the public on all problems. The root causes of crime are complex and varied, and there are many approaches that we can and should take to address them before funneling people into the criminal justice system. Underscore that police departments are not, and should not be considered, the solution for many of the problems facing our communities. We have the know-how to address the real issues without funneling people needlessly into a system that is not living up to our values.
- ▶ **Talk about the appropriate roles for police.** Meeting quotas and performing an excessive number of traffic stops for minor infractions that do not threaten public safety are a waste of police time. Instead, police should be available to respond to complaints and investigate crimes. Talk about why police are not the best instrument for crime prevention and what works better.

- ▶ **Underscore the crucial role of data and transparency.** It's difficult to know how well or poorly police are performing without having access to data regarding demographic information about who they've stopped and why. Communities need to see that police are transparent about their treatment of its members.
- ▶ **Tell people what works.** Put forward achievable shorter-term goals and solutions and show how they support the larger vision, including solutions beyond the police, who are far from the only protective factors of community safety.
- ▶ **Move beyond denouncing.** Highlight positive solutions and alternatives that ensure equal justice and protect public safety. Use examples of positive policing strategies that communities have employed.

Audience Considerations

- ▶ Many groups—people of color, immigrant communities, LGTBQ and progressive circles—already understand issues like systemic racism, unequal treatment, over-reliance on force and arrest. Move them to action.
- ▶ Other audiences want to believe recent stories of abuse and unequal treatment to be isolated incidents, and want to trust law enforcement (local police, border patrol, ICE, etc.) generally. Go above and beyond to connect the dots and show systemic barriers when talking with less engaged/affected groups.

Tips for Talking Racial Profiling

- ▶ Lead with values: Equal justice, fair treatment, freedom from discrimination, public safety, and accountability.
- ▶ Remember that 84% of the American public views racial profiling as a human rights violation.
- ▶ Define the term and fully explain that racial profiling is based on stereotypes and not evidence in an individual case. Explain why racial profiling is not an effective police tool and is a rights violation, and counter those who believe racial profiling may be acceptable if it somehow keeps communities safe.

Too often, police departments use racial profiling, which is singling people out because of their race or accent instead of based on evidence of wrongdoing. That's against our national values, endangers our young people, and reduces public safety.

- ▶ Explain why profiling harms us all, not just people of color or immigrants. This includes harm to our national values of fairness and equal justice, harm to public safety, and harm to Americans who are wrongly detained, arrested, or injured by law enforcement.

To work for all of us, our justice system depends on equal treatment and investigations based on evidence, not stereotypes or bias.

- ▶ Move beyond denouncing racial profiling alone and also highlight positive solutions and alternatives that ensure equal justice and protect public safety.

Racial profiling is an ineffective and harmful practice that undermines our basic values. Far too many immigration enforcement policies recklessly promote the practice. Any immigration policy reform needs to zero in on and eliminate this outdated and harmful practice.

- ▶ Offer multiple real-life examples. The idea of racial profiling is theoretical for some audiences. It's important to provide a wide range of examples of who has been wrongly stopped so that audiences can see the breadth of the problem.

Tips for Talking about Policing and LGBTQ Communities, Women, Sex Workers, and Homeless People

The goal of policing should be public safety, not harassment and intimidation. But harassment and discrimination continue to be a problem for many communities. Pointing out the special challenges these groups face when interacting with police can help audiences who are new to the issue understand how to improve policing so that equal treatment, respect, and rights are central to all police-community interactions.

- ▶ Urge audiences to examine police culture and practices. Remind audiences that police are supposed to serve all members of a community and explain how current police culture often targets those who society already marginalizes. If police are meant to maintain “public order,” people who fall outside of the narrowest and most conservative views of an ostensibly “well-ordered” society can quickly become targets. Police culture should instead focus on respect, rights, and truly protecting everyone from harm.
- ▶ Call for dramatic changes to police education around anti-LGBTQ violence so that officers respond appropriately. We also need to make sure that policies are in place that hold police accountable for their own behavior—both training them around working with LGBTQ communities and women, and enforcing zero tolerance policies on discrimination and sexual harassment.
- ▶ Remind people that breakdowns in trust and communication are a threat to public safety. We all need to be able to trust that the police will protect us and when police have good relationships with the community, we're all safer. Keep front and center the idea that law enforcement's role should be more narrowly defined, and not sprawl out into encompass being first responders for substance abuse issues, mental health concerns, and other complex issues best addressed by those who are specifically trained to help people in crisis.

Talking about Violence against Police

- ▶ Take a moment to acknowledge the loss and condemn violence. The loss of life is always a tragedy and we should speak consistently from our values on this fact.

We need to remember that we're all connected to each other, even though we may deeply disagree on issues and solutions. One loss is everyone's loss and we all need to take a moment to mourn each of them.

- ▶ Give careful thought about weighing in on more specific issues after a police death. Is now the best time to talk about policies? What will audiences hear from and feel about your remarks? It may even be counterproductive to weigh in.
- ▶ Remind audiences that we're all looking for solutions that recognize our shared humanity, how we're all in this together (or should be), and that the goal of bettering criminal justice policies, including police approaches, is to create a safer community. And ensuring the safety of police officers is a part of that work.

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