Open Data and Policing
A Five-Part Guide to Best Practices
PART V: BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

POLICE FOUNDATION

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I. Introduction

Law enforcement agencies across the country are increasing their use of open data to collaborate with their communities on the co-production of public safety.[1] To date, more than 140 law enforcement agencies have joined the Police Data Initiative (PDI), a community of practice consisting of member agencies that have committed to releasing open data.[2]

Drawing from promising practices used by these law enforcement agencies, this five-part best practice series aims to guide executives and members of local law enforcement agencies as they release open data. This guide, *Part V: Building Community Partnerships*, explores the role of community engagement in open data and ways to build on these police-community partnerships.

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1. For more on the value of open data, see *Law Enforcement Executive's Guide to Open Data: Supporting the Community in the Co-Production of Public Safety* (Washington, DC: Police Foundation, 2017), https://www.policefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PF_Law-Enforcement-Executives-Guide-to-Open-Data_WEB.pdf.
2. For more information on the Police Data Initiative, visit https://www.policedatainitiative.org/.

II. How Is Community Engagement Relevant to Open Data?

As agencies release and expand on open data, they are able to collaborate with their communities on the co-production of public safety. Open data provides police agencies opportunities to demonstrate their transparency and to collaborate with community members and groups, nonprofit organizations, and private companies to tackle public safety challenges. In this way, community engagement is both a key goal of releasing open data and a critical factor in developing community solutions to other goals like reducing crime, addressing public feelings of safety and requests for information, enhancing police-community relations and understanding, and more.

III. How Can an Agency Engage Its Community with Open Data?

Agencies have engaged their communities around open data in multiple ways and at multiple levels. A few of these methods and examples include the following:

- **Partnering with Local Community Members or Organizations to Release Open Data:** Agencies have partnered with local government, community members, universities, and other organizations to release open data. By partnering with others, agencies have been able to use staffing, technical, and other resources and knowledge bases to support or even lead their open data efforts. Partnering with others may also help agencies to gain valuable perspectives in developing their open datasets that they otherwise would not have.

  In early 2016, the **Chattanooga (Tennessee) Police Department** partnered with the Chattanooga Public Library, the City of Chattanooga, and the Open Chattanooga Brigade to launch an open data portal for the city through the library's website.[3]

- **Partnering with Local Government or Community Groups to Engage the Public on Open Data:** Partnering with local government, community groups, or other organizations can help agencies to better engage the public on open data. Working with community members to better understand open data and how to use it can help agencies demonstrate their desire to work with community members on the co-production of public safety and can encourage community members to use the data for this purpose.

  In 2017, the **Louisville (Kentucky) Metropolitan Police Department** participated in a community hackathon hosted by the Louisville Metro Government in conjunction with the Civic Data Alliance. More than 80 community members participated in the event, which focused on using open data to examine public safety challenges.[4]

- **Opening Data Known to be Valuable to Community Members:** Collaborating with community members on dataset selection and design can demonstrate the agency's willingness to respond to community concerns and interests.

  In 2017, the **Ferndale (Michigan) Police Department** developed an open data task force with local community representatives who helped to guide the dataset selection and design process.[5]

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3. "Not Just for Books: Public Libraries Partnering with Police to Engage Communities with Open Data," Police Data Initiative, accessed June 27, 2018, https://www.policedatainitiative.org/not-just-for-books/.

4. Michael Schnuerle, "Louisville's Open Data Day—Public Safety, Alexa, and Firearms," Medium.com, March 7, 2017, https://medium.com/louisville-metro-opi2/louisvilles-open-data-day-public-safety-alexa-firearms-e09fec2f6f7e.

5. See *Part II: Practices for Opening Data* for more on Ferndale's process of opening data.

- **Providing Resources to Support Community Members in Understanding Open Data:** Agencies can further engage their communities by helping them to understand the data being provided and its potential use. In this way, agencies can use open data to facilitate relationship building and stress their desire to collaborate with the public on the co-production of public safety.

In 2016, the **Cincinnati (Ohio) Police Department** partnered with the Greater Cincinnati Professional Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists to offer a pair of free seminars for the public, particularly aimed toward journalists and other newsroom personnel, to learn more about updated processes for submitting public records and to build relationships with CPD public information personnel. As part of the seminars, the CPD covered Cincinnati's open data portal to help familiarize media organizations with already-available information resources.[6]

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6.   Tom McKee, "Cincinnati Police Department unveils new Open Data Portal," Society of Professional Journalists - Greater Cincinnati Pro Chapter, September 16, 2016, http://cincyspj.blogspot.com/2016/09/cincinnati-police-department-unveils.html.

IV. Case Studies

Austin (Texas) Police Department

> *"If [police] really want to be community-driven, and want to be involved in the community, then we have to not be afraid to expose ourselves. . . . [I]t's very helpful, though, when your community is just as open."*
>
> – Ron MacKay, Division Manager, Planning and Crime Analysis, Austin Police Department[7]

The Austin Police Department (APD) employs approximately 1,908 sworn officers serving a community of over 938,000 people. Before being invited to participate in the Police Data Initiative, the APD was already publishing several reports on its public website to promote transparency, but the public wanted access to the raw datasets. Then-Chief Art Acevedo saw open data as a logical next step to continue to push transparency; this executive support has been sustained under Interim Chief Brian Manley, a great proponent of community engagement.

Austin (Texas) Police Department badge

The APD's first datasets were related to the subject matter of its annual reports, including racial profiling, crime and traffic, and response to resistance. Since then, the department's open data catalog has expanded to include datasets such as officer-involved shootings, incidents, and hate crimes.[8] One of the goals behind releasing data on these topics was to start conversations on topics the APD knew to be important to its community through data rather than conjecture.

One such conversation with the community regarded Austin's juvenile curfew ordinance. Chief Manley heard community concerns that this policy had not been effective in reducing crime. In response, Chief Manley had the APD data team study the data on crime rates when the curfew was and was not enforced, and the findings revealed that the curfew was not very effective in reducing juvenile crime and victimization. By engaging the community with this data and promoting the department's willingness to hear community concerns, a less-effective method of crime reduction was phased out.

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7. Ron MacKay, Austin Police Department, interview with Police Foundation staff, May 7, 2018.
8. The APD Open Data Portal can be found at https://data.austintexas.gov/.

Ron MacKay, APD Division Manager of Planning and Crime Analysis, has worked on the department's data since Interim Chief Manley took over the initiative. With strong support from executive leadership, MacKay and others from the APD have been able to use this data to engage with Austin's large technical community and the greater populace. One such opportunity has been APD's partnership with MEASURE, a technical nonprofit researching racial disparities.[9] Alongside MEASURE, the APD has hosted an annual data event to share not only its own innovations, but also the work of guest police agencies, independent statisticians, the Urban League, and others. MacKay notes that this "data day" has generated constructive and better-informed conversations with the community on sensitive topics: "If [police want] to be community-driven, and want to be involved in the community, then we have to not be afraid to expose ourselves. . . . [I]t's very helpful, though, when your community is just as open."

The web page for Austin Police Department and MEASURE's 2017 "Big Data and Community Policing" event

9. "Measure," accessed May 10, 2018, http://www.measureaustin.org/.

The APD is not finished with its open data work. While MacKay acknowledges that open data efforts must always be weighed against privacy, time, and budget constraints, the APD is always looking to add new datasets, encourage the visualization of its data, and attend events with the community. With 30,000 data inquiries received by the APD per year from across the country, there is plenty of feedback for the department to consider, but the APD has found that some of the greatest benefits have come from local community engagement.

Town of Chapel Hill (North Carolina) Police Department

Town of Chapel Hill (North Carolina) Police Department badge

The Town of Chapel Hill Police Department has approximately 100 sworn officers, serving an estimated 60,004 residents.[10] The Chapel Hill Police Department has a close working relationship with the other town departments, including the Chapel Hill Public Library. In 2015, the Chapel Hill Police Department began exploring the idea of releasing open data. At the same time, the public library began working on a similar initiative, and the two organizations decided to partner to release open data on a joint town portal. Chapel Hill began placing police data online in 2016, beginning with public safety–related datasets on agency demographics, traffic stops, and bicycle and pedestrian crashes.

The police department has found its partnership with the local library to be successful. As the busiest library in the state, the Chapel Hill Public Library has a large audience with which to share its data. The partnership has also helped to improve dataset design through collaboration between the police and library staff. Captain of Information Services Joshua Mecimore, who has led the Chapel Hill Police Department's open data efforts, notes, "I think that was really helpful for us—having a set of eyes on [the data] that weren't police officers'— and that helped ensure that the data was really useful from the beginning."

Chapel Hill has found that partnering does present some unique challenges. For example, preparing the data for release in a timely manner while protecting sensitive information can be difficult. However, the benefits have more than outweighed the challenges—and even these serve as a reminder that the partnership must be continually worked on to improve. At community meetings on open data, Chapel Hill police employees have been able to explain to community members that delays in the publication of certain datasets provide needed time to ensure its accuracy before it is released. The Chapel Hill Police Department and Chapel Hill Public Library also have regular quarterly

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10. "North Carolina Full-time Law Enforcement Employees by City, 2016," *Crime in the United States 2016* (Washington, DC: FBI, 2017), https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/tables/table-26/table-26-state-cuts/table-26-north-carolina.xls.

meetings to discuss progress and opportunities to expand. One of the best parts of the partnership, Captain Mecimore notes, is that the library representatives are "constantly thinking of new ways to look at our data or new pieces of our data that might be useful to the public or that they might be interested in."

In 2017, the Chapel Hill Public Library hosted an Open Data Day. Chapel Hill Police Department Chief Chris Blue, Captain Mecimore, and patrol officers participated and answered questions from attendees about policing, gathering public feedback on the data directly, and collaborating with community members to identify areas of expansion for the open data initiative. The event reinforced an interest in releasing parking data and in providing visualizations using the open data, such as charts and maps on bicycle and pedestrian crashes.

Town of Chapel Hill Police Department's open data portal includes data visualizations to engage users
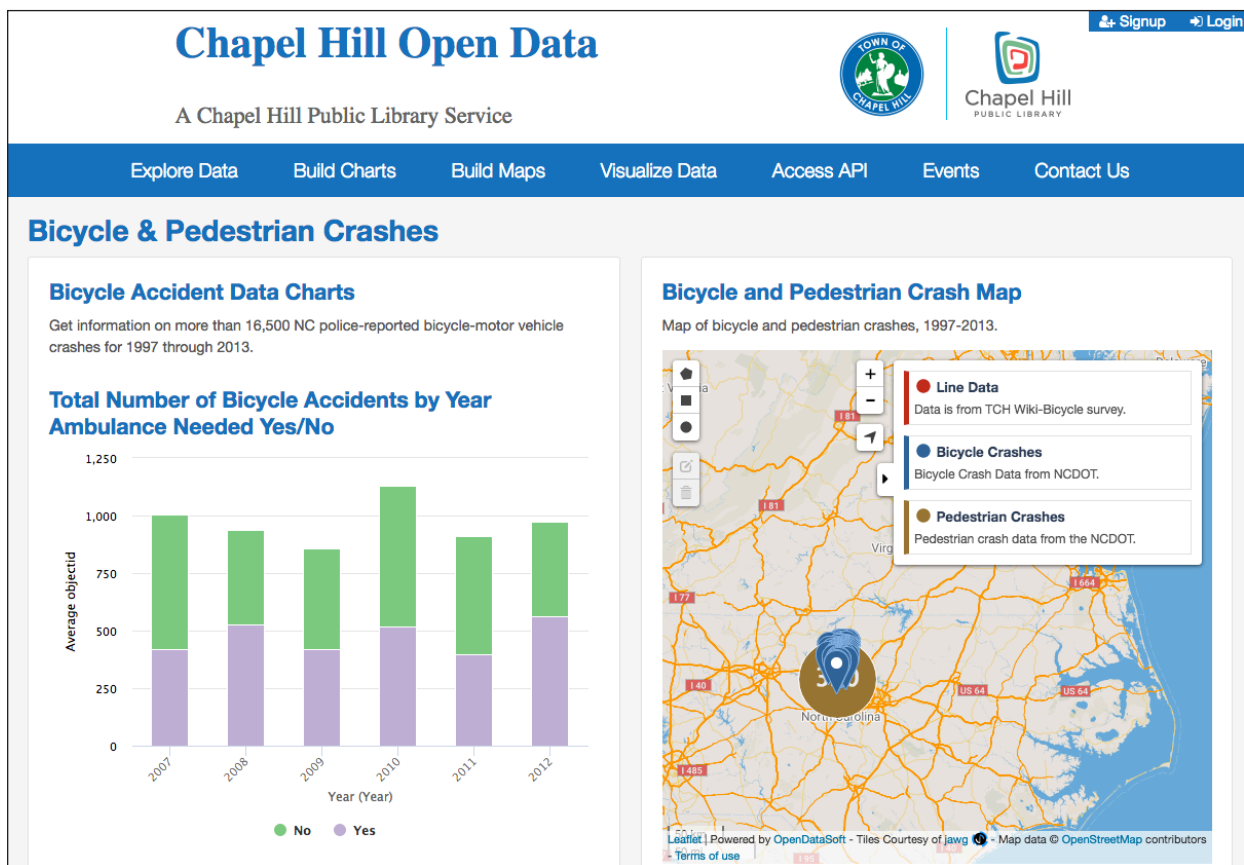
Understanding community expectations and meeting them, particularly through transparency, is important to the Chapel Hill Police Department. Captain Mecimore believes that one of the major benefits of open data is that it enables the department to demonstrate improvement over time. Building on its partnership with the library and other local departments, the Chapel Hill Police Department is continuing to expand the data portal and encourage community use and feedback.

V. Conclusion

Law enforcement agencies can partner with local government, organizations, or community members to build on the benefits of releasing open data. To do this, agencies have engaged their communities with and around open data in a variety of ways. Key lessons learned from Austin, Chapel Hill, and other Police Data Initiative agencies that have engaged their communities in the co-production of public safety are as follows:

- Build on existing community relationships.

- Continually explore ways to partner with local government, organizations, or individuals.

- Provide supporting resources to help others better understand the information.

About the Police Foundation

The **Police Foundation** is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing innovation and science in policing. As the country's oldest police research organization, the Police Foundation has learned that police practices should be based on scientific evidence about what works best, the paradigm of evidence-based policing.

Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure and works to transfer to local agencies the best new information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns. Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.

To learn more, visit the Police Foundation online.

Law enforcement agencies nationwide have released open datasets representing calls for service, arrests, and more. Members of the public, community groups, and law enforcement agencies can analyze this data to identify problems and craft solutions. To date, more than 140 law enforcement agencies have joined the Police Data Initiative (PDI). Drawing from their promising practices, this five-part series aims to guide executives and members of local law enforcement agencies as they release open data.

This guide, *Part V: Building Community Partnerships*, explores the role of community engagement in open data and ways to build on these police-community partnerships. Case studies are from Austin, Texas, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.