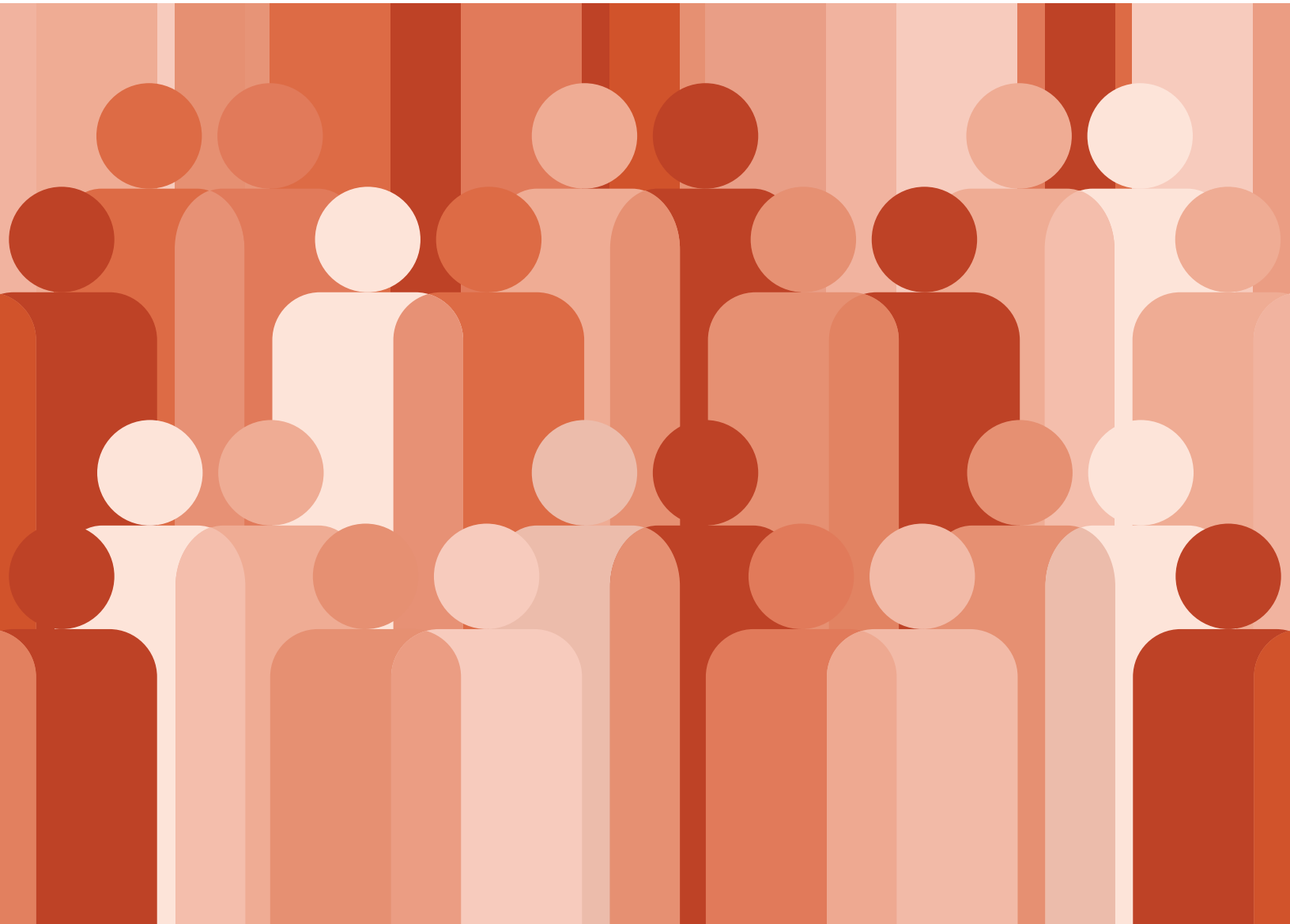


Operationalizing Proactive Community Engagement

A framework for police organizations

Roberto Santos and Rachel Santos



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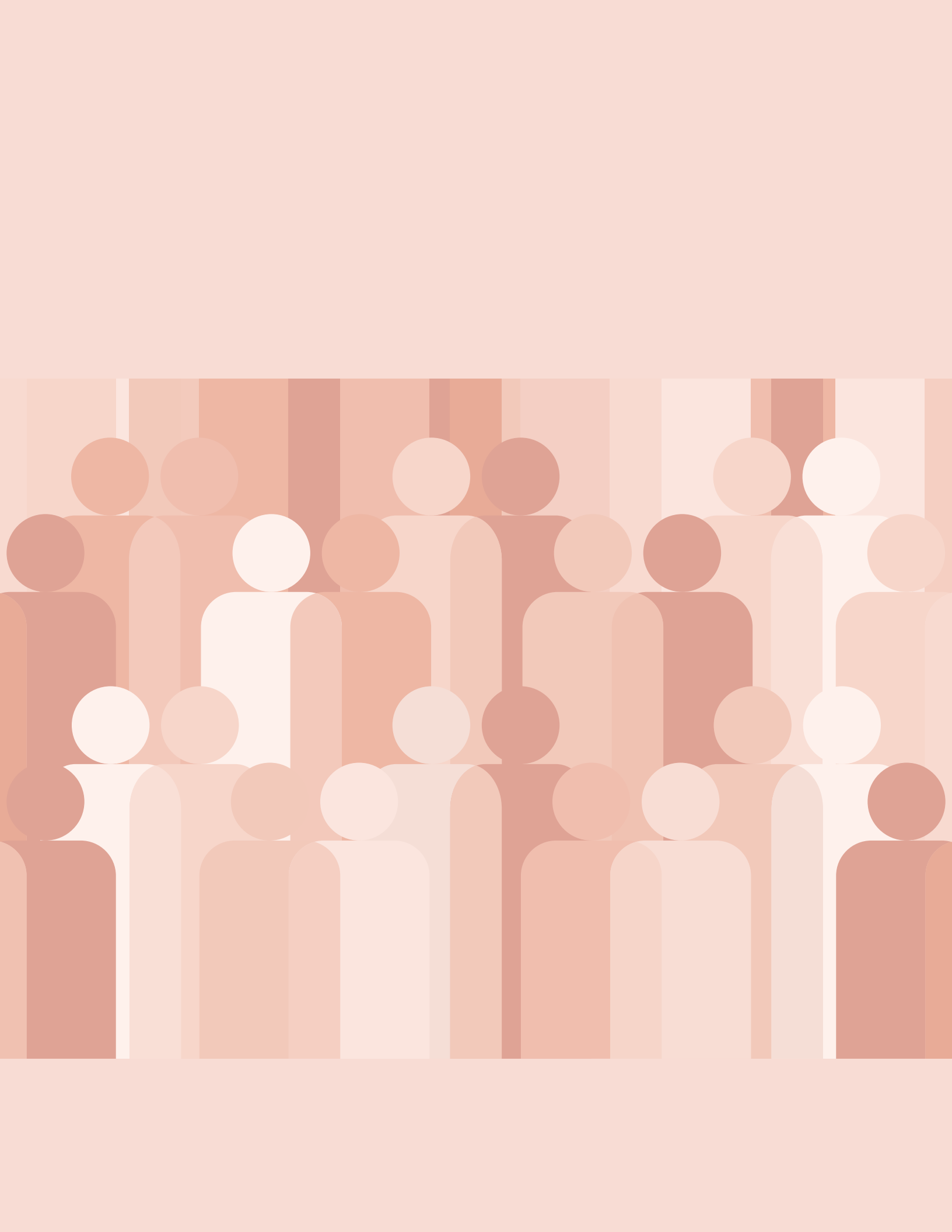
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Letter from the Director of the COPS Office

Colleagues:

Consistent, positive engagement between law enforcement and the community is key for creating legitimacy and trust and enabling the problem-solving partnerships on which community policing depends. Law enforcement agencies have instituted specific programs, events, or units to promote such engagement, from youth outreach programs to Coffee with a Cop; the COPS Office has published a number of guides and resources aimed at helping agencies duplicate these initiatives.

There are fewer resources available on implementing positive community engagement as part of every officer or deputy's day-to-day duties. This publication helps to fill that gap, with guidance for law enforcement leaders on operationalizing specific practices in their agencies—defining expectations, obtaining buy-in from all ranks of the agency, and establishing accountability mechanisms.

There is also a full list of considerations for operationalizing an example strategy, community walks, which can be adapted to suit other initiatives, according to an agency's needs.

It's easy to agree that increasing positive community interaction is a necessity; it's harder to agree on how to do that—let alone how to measure whether it's being done. This guide can help police leaders to implement their commitment to community engagement as part of daily operations.

Sincerely,



Hugh T. Clements, Jr.
Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the chiefs, sheriffs, and superintendents of the agencies that participated in this project for opening their “virtual doors” and allowing us to speak to officers, deputies, and troopers at every rank in their organizations. In particular, we would like to thank Chief Shon Barnes, Chief Scott Booth, Chief Maris Herold, and Sheriff Michael Adkinson for their review and feedback on the final draft. Lastly, we appreciate Matthew Scheider’s support through his attendance in the focus groups, our ongoing brainstorming and thoughtful conversations, and his review and feedback of the document.

Introduction

The three elements of community policing are (1) partnerships, (2) problem-solving, and (3) organizational transformation.¹ These elements depend on one another: To develop meaningful partnerships with the community and conduct collaborative problem-solving, the community must trust the police and see them as legitimate in their authority. Research has established that an effective way of increasing legitimacy and trust is consistent, positive engagement between police and community members.²

Police departments have developed many community policing programs and events that bring police and community members together to interact in positive ways; some of the longest-established include Police Athletic Leagues (PAL), National Night Out, and Coffee with a Cop. Generally, such programs are carried out by designated community policing units or a small number of specific personnel, or through a publicity campaign or social media. There are fewer established models for implementing community engagement departmentwide.

This guide focuses on promoting positive interpersonal interactions between community members and officers at any rank outside of normal law enforcement, management, or administrative duties. These proactive community contacts could be one-time or regular interactions, but they are personalized, often brief, direct, and positive. The significance of a simple type of interpersonal connection cannot be stressed enough: Research shows that community members' opinions of police are greatly affected by positive contacts.³ The challenge is setting up a framework to make officers—not only patrol officers, but detectives, sergeants, managers, and commanders—more willing to proactively and consistently engage with the community in a way that makes sense for their positions and can easily become part of their normal duties. Such a framework can help an agency

more easily systematize departmentwide community engagement to build legitimacy and trust, which improves community acceptance of police efforts to partner, problem-solve, and prevent crime.

Hearing from police is important to translating concepts supported by research into realistic ways to operationalize best practices. The discussion in this guide is the outcome of focus groups conducted with officers at every rank from a wide range of departments across the United States.⁴ Ninety-seven people participated in 12 focus groups conducted via video conferencing—two each of officers or detectives, sergeants, lieutenants, captains or commanders, executive level staff, and agency heads. The objective of the focus groups was to understand what would make law enforcement—both individuals and the broader police culture—more amenable to community engagement in daily activities and to identify challenges to community engagement implementation. Analysis of the conversations focused on finding out which activities are easy and realistic for law enforcement officers to implement individually and what organizational support they need to do so.

The results, presented here, offer considerations about how to operationalize proactive community engagement with clear expectations, mechanisms for accountability, and alignment with proactive crime reduction and crime prevention. The discussion covers why community engagement is important; a framework, outlined by the major themes from the focus groups, for operationalizing community engagement; and, as an example, an application of the framework to one specific community engagement strategy—community walks. Our hope is that agencies will use this framework to implement any type of engagement strategy that can work for their communities.

1. COPS Office (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services), *Community Policing Defined* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014), <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter?item=cops-p157>.

2. Joseph A. Schafer, Beth M. Huebner, and Timothy S. Bynum, "Citizen Perceptions of Police Services: Race, Neighborhood Context, and Community Policing," *Police Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (2003), 440–468, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611102250459>; Lorraine Mazerolle et al., "Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 9, no. 3 (2013), 245–274 (246), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11292-013-9175-2>; Christopher S. Koper et al., "Police Activities and Community Views of Police in Crime Hot Spots," *Justice Quarterly* 39, no. 7 (2002), 1400–1427 (1400), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2022.2111325>.

3. Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum, "Citizen Perceptions of Police Services" (see note 2); Jerry H. Ratcliffe and Evan T. Sorg, *Foot Patrol: Rethinking the Cornerstone of Policing* (New York: Springer, 2017); Kyle Peyton, Michael Sierra-Arévalo, and David G. Rand, "A Field Experiment on Community Policing and Police Legitimacy," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 40 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1910157116>.

4. Focus group methodology is a meaningful approach for this research as it entails guided group discussions to generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions and is an effective way of examining and debating a topic more deeply.


Why Proactive Community Engagement

While this guide assumes the reader already has a good understanding of the importance of police engaging positively with the community, the reason for its importance is still worth emphasizing. Researchers and policing experts agree that a community policing approach to community engagement is not merely compatible with evidence-based crime reduction strategies but is also essential for such strategies' success at reducing victimization. For police to employ proactive crime reduction measures effectively, the community must trust what they are doing.⁵ Community-based strategies that increase police legitimacy through collective efficacy and procedural justice⁶ have positive effects on community members' satisfaction with police and trust in the police.⁷ For example, a 2022 study examined

the impact of foot patrol and door-to-door interactions with community members outside of enforcement situations. It found that community members in high-crime areas had more confidence in police, more positive views of police legitimacy, and more favorable perceptions of police responsiveness and procedural justice when they experienced these positive police-community interactions than when they did not.⁸ Simply put, the more effectively the police engage with the community, the easier it is to systematically implement place-based, person-focused, and problem-solving approaches and the greater the community's willingness to play a role in these efforts.⁹

In addition to improving community members' trust of police, there is strong evidence that positive police-community interactions have positive effects on police officers as well: Proactive community engagement strategies that put police and community members together for non-law enforcement positive encounters foster approachability, familiarity, and trust between officers and residents, and studies show that this improves community members' perceptions of legitimacy and their satisfaction with police.¹⁰ Other studies find that officers enacting this positive engagement have more positive attitudes towards the community and their jobs and a higher commitment to the agency's community policing approach.¹¹

Despite the evidence in favor of proactive, positive community engagement, operationalizing these interactions so that they are carried out systematically and departmentwide



The more effectively the police engage with the community, the easier it is to systematically implement place-based, person-focused, and problem-solving approaches.

5. David L. Weisburd and Malay K. Majimundar, eds., *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2018); Matthew C. Scheider, Robert Chapman, and Amy Schapiro, "Towards the Unification of Policing Innovations under Community Policing," *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 32, no. 4 (2009), 694–718, <https://doi.org/10.1108/13639510911000777>.
6. Mazerolle et al., "Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy" (see note 2).
7. Charlotte Gill et al., "Community-Oriented Policing to Reduce Crime, Disorder and Fear and Increase Satisfaction and Legitimacy among Citizens: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 10, no. 4 (2014), 399–428, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11292-014-9210-y>.
8. Koper et al., "Police Activities and Community Views" (see note 2).
9. Roberto Santos and Rachel Santos, *Stratified Policing: An Organizational Model for Proactive Crime Reduction and Accountability* (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).
10. Ratcliffe and Sorg, *Foot Patrol* (see note 3); Peyton, Sierra-Arévalo, and Rand, "A Field Experiment" (see note 3); Benjamin W. Fisher et al., "The Alignment between Community Policing and the Work of School Resource Officers," *Police Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2022), 561–587, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111211053843>.
11. J. Kevin Ford, Daniel A. Weissbein, and Kevin E. Plamondon, "Distinguishing Organizational from Strategy Commitment: Linking Officers' Commitment to Community Policing to Job Behaviors and Satisfaction," *Justice Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (2003), 159–185, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820300095491>; Victoria A. Sytsma and Eric L. Piza, "The Influence of Job Assignment on Community Engagement: Bicycle Patrol and Community-Oriented Policing," *Police Practice & Research: An International Journal* 19, no. 4 (2018), 347–364, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2017.1364998>; Mark A. Glaser and Janet Denhart, "Community Policing and Community Building: A Case Study of Officer Perceptions," *The American Review of Public Administration* 40, no. 3 (2010), 309–325, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074009340050>.

is tricky. The strength of community policing lies in its flexibility and diverse set of strategies—but this flexibility can create ambiguity around how proactive community engagement should be systematically implemented and by whom.¹² This lack of clarity results in many possible interpretations of what community engagement means, both for agency leaders when communicating their expectations to their employees and for staff carrying out that engagement in their day-to-day activities. There are no industry-wide standards for setting out specific expectations and responsibilities for ranks, units, and divisions and holding individuals accountable.¹³

Last, it is important to acknowledge at the outset of this discussion that any efforts by the police to build better relationships with their community requires that all parties

be willing to participate. While most police departments incorporate community policing philosophy in some way, police reformers assert that police must adapt specific organizational mechanisms to let both their personnel and the community know that community policing is an important component of the agency's mission.¹⁴ Yet, even though the research discussed here indicates that positive interactions prompted by the police can, in fact, increase legitimacy and trust, police may not be successful if the community does not reciprocate. The reasons for such a lack of reciprocation may stem from a number of factors, such as local politics, high levels of crime, or backlash from a major negative event. Ultimately, however, it is the role of the police to keep trying, deliberately and thoughtfully, to operationalize and sustain processes that create meaningful and consistent community engagement.

12. Mark E. Correia and David A. Jenks, "Expectations of Change: The Congruency between Beat Officers and Supervisors and Its Impact on Programmatic Change," *Police Practice and Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), 16–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2010.497329>; James J. Willis, *First Line Supervision under COMPSTAT and Community Policing: Lessons from Six Agencies* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2011), <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter?item=cops-p204>.

13. Correia and Jenks, "Expectations of Change" (see note 12).

14. Edward Maguire and William Wells, *Implementing Community Policing: Lessons from 12 Agencies* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2009), <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter?item=cops-w0746>.

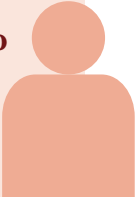
Focus Groups Overview

This guide was created as part of a research project in which the authors collaborated with 14 law enforcement agencies of different sizes (ranging from 23 to more than 700 sworn employees) and types (local city, town, and county police; county sheriffs; and state police). The Center for Police Practice, Policy and Research at Radford University in Radford, Virginia (<https://radford.edu/cp3r>), has partnerships with many of these police departments. It collaborates with agencies to implement and evaluate innovative strategies as well as to obtain their input about the current state of policing and feedback about practical application of research.

The participating agencies include the following:

1. **Boulder (Colorado) Police Department.**
Serves 105,000 population with 177 sworn personnel
2. **Danville (Virginia) Police Department.**
Serves 40,000 population with approximately 130 sworn personnel
3. **Dayton (Ohio) Police Department.**
Serves 137,000 population with approximately 360 sworn personnel
4. **Delaware State Police.**
Serves 990,000 population with approximately 740 sworn personnel
5. **Fort Myers (Florida) Police Department.**
Serves 105,000 population with approximately 260 sworn personnel
6. **Galax (Virginia) Police Department.**
Serves 6,500 population with approximately 25 sworn personnel
7. **Madison (Wisconsin) Police Department.**
Serves 275,000 population with approximately 500 sworn personnel
8. **Port St. Lucie (Florida) Police Department.**
Serves 220,000 population with 290 sworn personnel
9. **Putnam County (Florida) Sheriff's Office.**
Serves 73,000 population with approximately 120 sworn personnel

The goal of the focus groups was to take what we know from research about why community engagement is important and effective and talk to practitioners about the business of policing and learn from them what is realistic and doable in practice to improve police relationships with the community.



10. **Roanoke [City] (Virginia) Police Department.**
Serves 96,000 population with approximately 248 sworn personnel
11. **Roanoke County (Virginia) Police Department.**
Serves 98,000 population with approximately 142 sworn personnel
12. **Salisbury (North Carolina) Police Department.**
Serves 36,000 population with approximately 79 sworn personnel
13. **Salt Lake City (Utah) Police Department.**
Serves 202,000 population with 490 sworn personnel
14. **Walton County (Florida) Sheriff's Office.**
Serves 81,000 population (and more than 3 million visitors per year) with approximately 260 sworn personnel

These agencies represent a range of approaches and capacity for proactively engaging with the community. Some had dedicated community policing personnel and resources; others did not. The goal of the focus groups was to take what we know from research about why proactive community engagement is important and talk to practitioners about the business of policing, learning from them what is realistic and doable to improve police relationships with the community. Specifically, we hoped to hear about these agencies' challenges, what works for them, and their ideas about what would be realistic within police culture. Essentially, we wanted to identify commonalities within each rank across the different agencies and parse out themes to figure out the "tricky part" of implementing community engagement and recommend ways to overcome it.

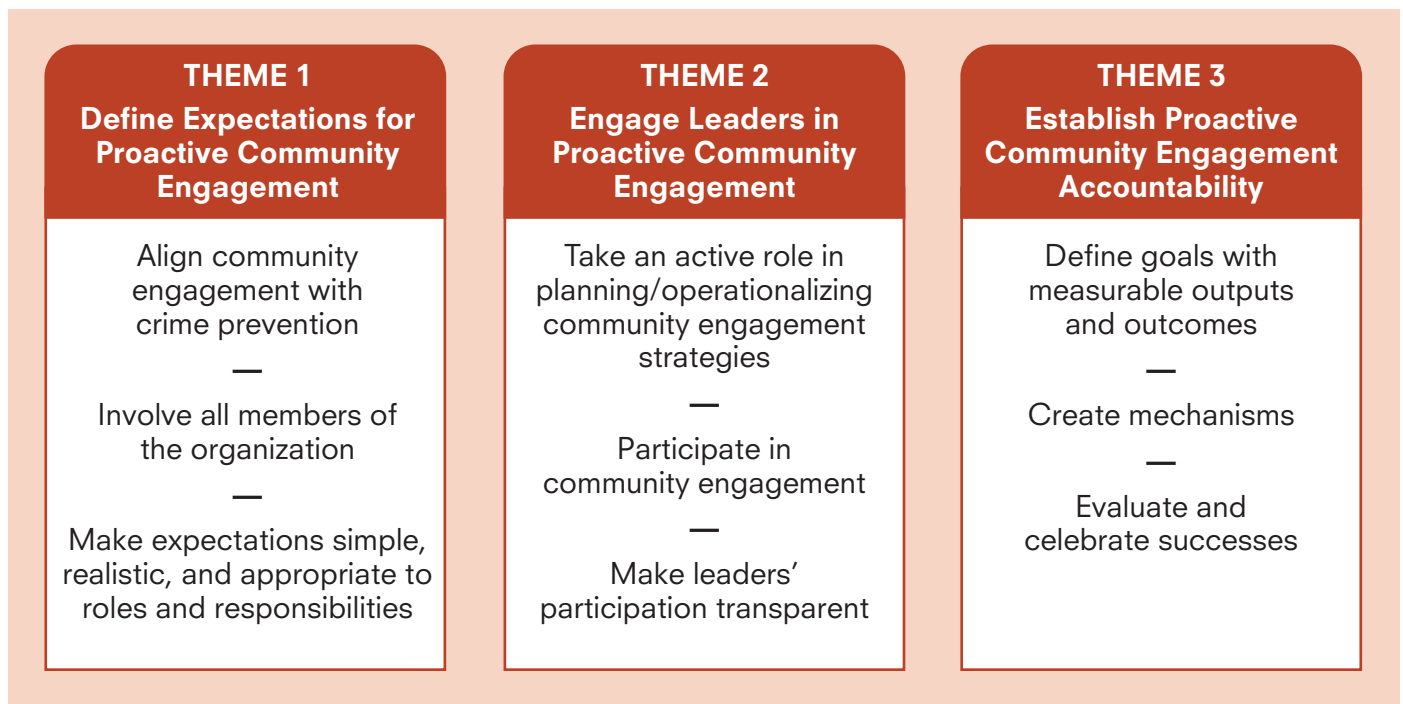
Focus Group Themes

In many agencies, the positive nonenforcement interactions that foster community engagement do not occur consistently or naturally on their own throughout the organization. Improving the willingness of personnel at all levels to create these interactions is key to enhancing police-community relationships. It was apparent in the focus group discussions both (a) that police leaders can use guidance to incorporate effective and systematic community engagement practices into all personnel's daily routine and (b), consistent with research on the challenges of implementing community policing,¹⁵ that many leaders need guidance on the particulars of how to do so.

Across all focus groups, individuals were willing to do community engagement, but only if it made sense for their role; if structures were in place to support them; and if most of the department, including all sections and ranks, participated. We synthesized the most prominent and widely shared experiences and recommendations from the focus group discussions into the following three themes, each divided into three subthemes as illustrated in Figure 1.

The participants' consensus was that if leaders can accomplish these goals, they will make it easier for the agency to adopt proactive community engagement and make police personnel more willing to take part, and make the engagements themselves more effective.

Figure 1. Focus Group Themes and Subthemes



15. Stephen D. Mastrofski, James J. Willis, and Tammy Rinehart Kochel, "The Challenges of Implementing Community Policing in the United States," *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 1, no. 2 (2007), 223–234, <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pam026>.

Theme 1. Define expectations for proactive community engagement

Expectations for the agency and for individual officers must be defined. Simply saying “engage with the community,” “go to this event,” or “do community policing” is not nearly enough for individuals to know what is expected of them or for the agency to employ a coordinated and unified community engagement effort. Across all ranks, officers in the focus groups agreed that

- objectives should be clear and focused in neighborhoods or with certain groups;
- leaders at the top and throughout the organization should set clear expectations for all members of the agency;
- proactive community engagement activities should be appropriate for an individual’s current roles and responsibilities.

In particular, line-level officers and detectives felt that community engagement activities are perceived as extra work, because such activities often seem to be added to their usual expectations of answering calls for service and investigating crimes. They also agreed that if an agency wants community engagement to truly be part of officers’ jobs, there should be the same expectation for supervisors and leaders to have community engagement as part of their jobs along with their normal administrative expectations.


“Tell us what to do, be clear about it, and we’ll get it done.”

Align community engagement with crime prevention

Officers at every rank, and especially those at the line level in patrol, were more likely to carry out what was asked of them if they saw a “larger purpose” for it. Expectations that were vague or not connected to a purpose were seen as optional and something that a dedicated community policing unit could and should be doing. Lack of purpose could be frustrating, especially when there was not something officers could achieve personally as a “win,” like a smile back or seeing less victimization in a neighborhood. When outcomes were not clear, it made individuals feel that they were going through the motions and the engagement was impersonal. As many participants stated, the more explicitly their community engagement activities were defined, the more willing individuals at every rank were to participate.

“It’s easier for me to see the value of doing community walks as part of crime reduction, and other people are doing their part in this area as well, but not in the whole beat.”

Participants across ranks also found it important that when they do community engagement, the community policing units work with them toward the same goal. They want to feel like their efforts are working in conjunction with what others in their department are doing to achieve common outcomes together. Almost all participants said—and strongly emphasized—that it was obvious to them how impactful it was when their efforts in community engagement were specifically tied to reducing and preventing crime. The better defined the problem in terms of when and where to focus, the easier it is for participants to see the rationale for their community engagement activities. When areas where they had been doing proactive community engagement experienced reductions in victimization or identifiable improvements in community members’ interactions with police (such as willingness to engage in small talk and provide assistance in investigations), the engagement feels good and worthwhile, and they are willing to keep doing it.



“As a commander, I sometimes undervalue how important it is for me to consistently show my rank and file how community engagement in focused areas is helping to reduce crime.”

As the evidence clearly shows,¹⁶ effective crime prevention calls for a combination of place-based, person-focused, problem solving, and community-based strategies. A community-based approach cannot be the entire crime reduction strategy, but it does make implementing the other strategies easier. Reducing victimization and increasing safety in the community is a core value of every cop, so tying community engagement work to crime prevention work is essential. The more police can be convinced that community engagement makes crime reduction work easier, the more willing they will be to engage the community. Just as crime reduction efforts are most effective when they are focused on specific persons, locations, or problems based on analysis, community engagement efforts should be similarly focused for greatest effect.

Involve all members of the organization


Many agencies have a designated unit whose personnel have more extensive community policing training, have specific expertise, and are typically very comfortable engaging with a wide variety of community members. This unit can be instrumental in managing specific larger-scale programs, such as citizen police academies, police explorers, and National Night Out. These units can also be key to developing and tracking the implementation of strategic plans around engagement activities. However, they should not be the only ones to carry out community engagement. They should be seen as one of many resources for the agency's community engagement strategies—not the only resource.

A focused, organizational approach is required to remove any vagueness about what is expected. A successful community engagement strategy is multilayered, with different parts of the organization working together so resources

are implemented in the most efficient and effective ways. Precise priorities for community engagement make it easier to determine the best ranks, units, and individuals for a particular strategy. Leaders should coordinate across units and divisions to implement community-based programs and events as well as proactive community engagement.

For a practice to be fully adopted and incorporated into police operations, it cannot be assigned only to the lowest ranks or just to individuals who happen to be good at it. It should not be optional or seen as extra work but rather fundamental to what the police do. The continual community contact needed for outreach to be effective is too much work for a small handful of people. Even when there are many examples of individuals in an agency establishing relationships and developing successful partnerships with the community, these individual efforts are not sufficient or focused enough to improve and sustain a relationship between police and community. But to involve the entire agency in community engagement, there must be a clear expectation that everyone in the organization, from line-level to chief to civilian employees, be part of the effort.

As with other important responsibilities, community engagement should be incorporated into the responsibilities of individuals across the organization. No rank or division should be excused from leading and actively working some aspect of community engagement. The type of engagement they do should match the span of influence of each rank and the responsibilities of their day-to-day work.



“One of the negatives about our [Community Policing] Unit is that we kind of do our own thing and we’re not part of an organizational approach. At times it seems like we have to really struggle to convince officers to participate in some community activities that we set up.”

16. Weisburd and Majimundar, eds, *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime* (see note 5).

Make expectations simple, realistic, and appropriate to roles and responsibilities

When expectations for community engagement were vague or not connected to a purpose, individuals in the focus groups tended to see community engagement as something that a community policing unit could and should be doing instead. The more focused and explicit the expectations for community engagement, the more willing individuals at every rank said they would be to participate. Participants across all ranks stressed that they need to know in detail what actions and tasks are required—the more specific, the better. Even participants in community policing units often find their expectations and direction too vague and reported being deployed haphazardly and with little focus. It was clear in the discussions that community engagement meant different things to different people—and that even when personnel agree on the meaning, they may not be able to follow through. Consequently, an agency should not assume individuals can simply “do community engagement” when told to. They may not know what to do, or they may know what is required of them but lack the ability to do it. Thus, when considering what is realistic for individuals, agencies should recognize that even if all officers’ interpersonal skills are adequate to responding to calls for service, they may not all have the same capability

or desire to interact with community members beyond that. To overcome this potential shortfall, an agency must seek to improve individuals’ interpersonal skills just as it does with the skills for other required tasks, such as writing better police reports.

Engagement activities should then be developed through systematic practices that can be incorporated into a wide range of individuals’ daily routines and not only by motivated officers or a community policing unit. Guidance must account specifically for how individuals can carry out proactive community engagement activities that make sense to their job responsibilities and are realistic for them to do regularly. These activities should also align with other priorities in the agency; they should be simple, realistic, and not embarrassing or demeaning to carry out.


Police culture is strong, so expectations for community engagement should not seek to change an agency’s hierarchical structure or individual job descriptions. Instead, they should seek to incorporate incremental changes to the established daily responsibilities of each person’s assignment. This makes community engagement a shared responsibility that requires everyone to do their small part of a larger coordinated effort.¹⁷

Theme 2. Engage leaders in proactive community engagement


Leaders should be engaged in proactive community engagement at both the organizational and individual levels. While this idea could fall under the umbrella of the previous theme, defining expectations, it was such an important point of discussion across all the focus groups that it warrants its own discussion. Many participants at all ranks discussed how the responsibility for community engagement activities is primarily delegated to officers. Participants at every rank agreed that community engagement should be a top-down, holistic, agency-wide policy and that those holding leadership positions should be able to clearly communicate its importance. All participants who spoke on the subject emphasized the importance of transparency of leadership participation, affirming that if they knew their bosses were participating, they would be more willing to do the work themselves. Officers were particularly adamant about wanting to know what the bosses were specifically doing for community engagement work.

“We need to teach them how to talk to people; to feel comfortable having a casual conversation, especially in some of our most strained neighborhoods; what to do in an interaction. Similar to how we train officers to communicate and ask questions in order to handle calls for service, we should teach what engagement is and how to do it, so people know how to fulfill the expectations.”

17. Santos and Santos, *Stratified Policing* (see note 8).



“We’ve seen that one of the biggest impacts that creates momentum for willingness for everyone to do community engagement is seeing commanders out there.”



Take an active role in planning and operationalizing community engagement strategies

Those in the command-level ranks must be active participants during the planning and development of specific community engagement strategies and take an active leadership role in their implementation. Commanders are positioned to set aside the time needed to engage different ranks and areas in the agency. They typically have more savvy and experience with working with the community as well as the necessary amount of authority and autonomy to make decisions and coordinate resources necessary to carry out community engagement strategies as part of the agency’s larger approach. Accordingly, when developing strategies, agencies should remember that commanders are well positioned to translate the organization’s overall approach to their scope of responsibility—not only by deploying police resources but also through their own collaboration with community, businesses, and other criminal justice entities.

Participate in community engagement


All ranks should directly participate in community engagement. Those in formal supervisory positions should lead and mentor the individuals they supervise. Moreover, they must actively participate in community engagement, foster relationships, and facilitate collaboration themselves to create a cultural shift that involves the entire agency. Leaders should not delegate tasks that they can do themselves or that are appropriate for the rank they hold. Individuals at higher ranks, who are not as tied to the radio as patrol officers are, have more flexibility to control the amount of quality time they have to engage and build rapport with the community. As leaders, they can be given the responsibility

to build relationships with the community that others, who have less time to engage, can build on through quick direct interactions.


Community members appreciate frequent interactions with officers of all ranks because they perceive the community engagement effort to be more sincere than if it is only delegated to lower-level patrol officers. Also, there are situations when it is more appropriate for higher-ranking agency personnel to engage with community leaders in the neighborhoods. Interaction with the community allows agency leaders to assess the community’s readiness for engagement with the police. If leaders spend time at the outset to establish relationships, create an atmosphere of collaboration, and create opportunities for lower ranks to have simple quick positive interactions with the community, they can set up easy wins for the ranks below them.

Make leaders’ participation transparent

To further reinforce the expectations of proactive community engagement, the agency must make sure the community engagement work that leaders do is seen by the lower ranks. Leaders must make a concerted, strong effort to explicitly show and communicate that they are actively participating. Individuals should see the leaders personally planning, strategizing, operationalizing, coordinating, and engaging with the community. It is especially important in larger departments to communicate leadership’s involvement in these efforts through internal communication mechanisms—roll call, emails, text, website pages, etc.



“If community engagement is so important, I want to see my bosses doing it too.”



Theme 3. Establish accountability for proactive community engagement

Even when proactive community engagement is aligned with crime prevention, expectations are clearly defined, and leaders participate, there must also be a system of accountability for community engagement. The system must include developing specific goals for community engagement, creating accountability mechanisms that are sustainable within the agency's current practices, and evaluating the impact of the strategies and celebrating successes. The goal of accountability is to trust but verify that the work is being done and communicate that participation is no longer optional.

Consistently, participants at all ranks stressed the importance of accountability for carrying out community engagement activities, both for individuals and for community policing units. When supervisors assign community engagement tasks using terms such as "when you have time," personnel are more likely to see them as optional, leading to a lack of accountability for failing to do them. Participants perceived their agencies' accountability measures as inconsistent; this lack of accountability also applied to specialized units tasked to do community policing exclusively. These units' efforts are seen as not aligned with a larger purpose and with what others are being asked to do.

An accountability process enforces expectations and is essential for creating the organizational change that institutionalizes community engagement as part of police work. Agencies may have a clear community policing mission but only vague expectations (e.g., "get out of the car and talk to people when you can"). Expectations for individuals should be detailed, based on their rank and position, and tied to a specific strategy so that the individuals can be held accountable for meeting them.

Define goals with measurable outputs and outcomes

Goals establish an agency's direction and priorities as well as its internal and external expectations. Without tying proactive community engagement to clear goals, it is difficult to measure what is being accomplished. People like to see the results of what they do. The more detailed the community engagement goal, the more refined the methods to achieve

it can be, and the higher the likelihood of success. Since the ultimate purpose of policing is to improve community members' quality of life and safety, the community should also be part of the goal development process. A goal should not be "increasing community engagement;" rather, goals should get everyone in the organization working toward a common purpose that is transparent for the agency and the community as well as prioritize and direct their efforts.¹⁸

"We have specific goals to reduce crime in specific high-crime areas. We interact with the community there with the other things we do and can see the results there."

As part of this process, it is very important to understand the readiness for engagement, both of a community overall and of the smaller parts of the community where engagement activities will be focused. If the focus is a high-crime neighborhood where community members have a low level of trust in the police, then the strategy's goals and implementation will be different than they would be in a neighborhood where there is a higher level of trust. It cannot be assumed that every community will interpret increased police interactions the same way.

"As chief, it's my responsibility to understand that sometimes a neighborhood is just not ready for us to proactively engage so I have to be thoughtful in how my officers and I improve the chances of successfully having positive community interactions."

18. Santos and Santos, *Stratified Policing* (see note 8).

It is important to distinguish community engagement activities (outputs) from measures of success (outcomes) to ensure the right types of data are collected and evaluated for the right purpose. Tracking activities should focus on how much community engagement work, and of what types, individuals are doing. Assessment methods should be realistic and within the scope of individuals' other responsibilities. They should also be closely tied to expectations and reflect how those differ for different individuals (patrol officers, detectives, supervisors, managers, etc.).

Create mechanisms

The purpose of an accountability structure is to have transparent mechanisms that ensure individuals at each level are doing their part. Even something as institutionalized as wearing a uniform has specific mechanisms for holding individuals accountable to the department's standards. Just as the expectations for community engagement cannot be vague and ambiguous, neither can the assessment mechanisms. Vague expectations make it easy for certain individuals to appear as though they are doing community engagement when they are not. As when police leaders implement any new essential practice or adjust an existing one, they should communicate expectations for community engagement through a policy and create mechanisms to enforce adherence.


Developing accountability mechanisms will take concerted effort because leadership must ensure that processes are realistic and sustainable within and alongside other organizational practices. Notably, when community engagement policy is aligned with an accountability process already established for proactive crime reduction, it is both less complicated and more meaningful.

Operationalizing accountability mechanisms includes both formal and informal methods to determine

1. whether the right strategies have been selected;
2. whether people are doing them and doing them correctly;
3. that the right people are held accountable.


Formal mechanisms include policies that state expectations explicitly so people can be held to a standard, systemized documentation and tracking of community engagement activities, and meetings to discuss efforts and hold people accountable. Informal mechanisms include constant

communication of expectations, observation to see that activities are being carried out and in the right way, and personal discussions by bosses to hold individuals accountable.



“As commanders, every month we present to the chief our crime reduction efforts as well as our community engagement activities in specific high crime areas and locations.”

Mechanisms for documenting community engagement activity should be transparent to all in the organization. Because a wide range of people will be doing community engagement work, accountability mechanisms should ensure that everyone—including higher ranks, specialized units, and nonsworn employees—use them when appropriate and in the same way. For example, some agencies use a specific call type in the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system for community engagement work; accountability mechanisms should ensure that all individuals doing engagement in the community, not just patrol officers, use this code. Another example is a robust intranet platform with GPS that can collect more detailed information about community engagement activities, provide real-time transparency as things are being done, and be used for reporting out in accountability meetings. Transparency of the accountability mechanisms is vital. When everyone can see and hear what others are doing and how those activities tie to larger crime prevention and organizational goals, they will be more willing to do it themselves.



“We have a program where I can go in and type a short note that everyone sees about the interactions I had on my shift with community members in a particular area.”

Evaluate and celebrate successes

Accountability is not just making sure people do what they are supposed to do but also finding out whether goals are being achieved and letting others know about those achievements and successes. Holding people accountable for activities that do not have an impact is fruitless. If people are doing what is expected of them but goals are not being achieved, part of the accountability process is finding out whether the approach is the correct one and how expectations might need to be changed. The only way to determine this is to evaluate the work based on outcome measures. In addition, evaluating goals keeps the organization focused. An ongoing assessment process informs the agency of adjustments it needs to make so that it is as efficient and effective as possible.

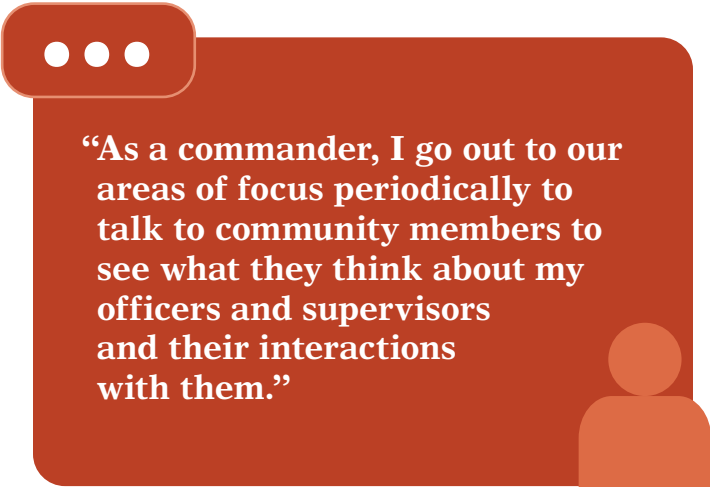
There are a number of ways to see the impact of proactive community engagement. However, none of them on their own will provide a clear answer. Evaluation requires thoughtful collection and meaningful analysis of data. The impact of engagement activities can only be determined through the combination of measurements such as increases in crime reporting, community cooperation in investigations, positive feedback from community members, partnerships with community members who are willing to work with the police on problems, community satisfaction with the police, and police personnel's positive views of the community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project has been to develop a realistic framework for creating an organizational culture that persuades individual agency personnel to proactively engage with the community. To change an organization's culture and individuals' mindsets around how community engagement is carried out, a holistic approach is vital—one that lays out a structure, expectations, and accountability. Such an approach is a force multiplier, because it engages a wide range of individuals of all ranks and areas of the agency instead of relying on a small, dedicated unit. One unit or a handful of specialized officers is just not enough to sustain the amount of engagement necessary to have a broader impact on the community.

The three themes discussed here lay out this framework for operationalizing proactive community engagement strategies. First, leaders must select a set of community engagement strategies appropriate to the needs of their community and aligned with their crime prevention efforts. Then, they must coordinate across units and divisions to implement these strategies appropriately and effectively. Finally, they must institute accountability measures.

The next section illustrates an example of applying this framework to operationalize one specific community engagement strategy—community walks.



“As a commander, I go out to our areas of focus periodically to talk to community members to see what they think about my officers and supervisors and their interactions with them.”

Operationalizing a Community Engagement Strategy: Community Walks

This section takes a specific proactive community engagement strategy and applies it to a neighborhood experiencing high victimization. The community walks strategy highlighted here is both commonly used in policing and an effective way of implementing the type of proactive community engagement discussed in this guide. The core concept—telling police officers to get out of their patrol cars to walk and talk with community members in a neighborhood experiencing high levels of crime—seems simple and straightforward. But implementing community walks effectively requires a holistic approach to enhance officers' willingness to proactively and systematically engage with the community. What follows is an outline of how each theme and subtheme can be accounted for in this context.

Define expectations for community walks

Align community walks with crime prevention

- Leaders message the organization that positive engagement with the community during walks is another form of directed patrol and an integral part of an effective crime-reduction approach.
- The neighborhood for the walks is defined through the analysis of crime and victimization data. It has distinct borders, so everyone is clear about where walks will be conducted and on what schedule.
- Walks are linked with crime prevention and proactive crime-reduction activities as well as other community engagement activities.
- The purpose of walks is not neighborhood-wide enforcement of laws but building relationships between the police and the community and deterring crime through police presence.

Involve all members of the organization

- Patrol and investigations, as well as administrative and support bureaus, prioritize walks in the neighborhood and coordinate their efforts.
- Dedicated personnel in a community policing unit prioritize their efforts in the neighborhood.
- Supervisors and commanders strategize and oversee implementation of walks and mentor and train lower ranks on the agency's expectations.

Make expectations simple, realistic, and appropriate to roles and responsibilities

- Community interactions on a walk should meet the following expectations for the individual staff member and the agency:
 - ◆ Walks are not intended as investigative or field contacts with suspicious individuals or offenders (though that certainly could happen during the course of the walk).
 - ◆ Personnel are friendly and positive.
 - ◆ Personnel express concern about the welfare of community members and the safety of the community and listen to community members.
 - ◆ Conversations are about the neighborhood specifically—what if anything is needed, crime and disorder concerns, or just small talk.
 - ◆ Agency provides personnel with items or flyers to hand out to community members, including children.
 - ◆ Agency prepares suggested talking points specific to that particular neighborhood for personnel.
 - ◆ Agency prepares personnel with ways to respond if they are asked why they are doing walks.
 - ◆ Walks are coordinated so they occur on an identified timetable or after certain events or significant occurrences.

- Types of walks include the following:

- ◆ **Post-incident walk.**¹⁹ Within 24 hours of all homicides and shootings that occur in the neighborhood, conduct a walk coordinated by the community policing unit with representation from executive staff; investigative commanders, supervisors, and detectives; patrol commander, supervisors, and officers responsible for the neighborhood; nonsworn employees; specialized units; city officials; social services; counselors; and others who want to join. The goal is to show the police care and provide what information they can about the investigation directly to those affected.
- ◆ **Officer walk.** A 20-minute walk coordinated by an officer responsible for answering calls in the neighborhood, including at least one more officer, and carried out a minimum of three times in a work week.
- ◆ **Squad walk.** A 30-minute walk coordinated by a sergeant responsible for supervising officers answering calls in the neighborhood, including the sergeant and at least one officer, and carried out a minimum of three times in a work week.
- ◆ **Shift walk.** A 30-minute walk coordinated by a shift lieutenant responsible for supervising officers answering calls in the neighborhood, including the lieutenant, at least one sergeant, and at least one officer, and carried out a minimum of three times in a work week.
- ◆ **District walk.** A 30-minute walk coordinated by the district captain responsible for the neighborhood, including the captain, patrol lieutenant, and patrol sergeant, and at least one non-patrol captain, one non-patrol lieutenant, and one non-patrol sergeant, and carried out a minimum of two times in a month.

- ◆ **Captain walk.** A 45-minute walk by the district captain responsible for the neighborhood and at least one other person from patrol and carried out a minimum of three times in a work week.
- ◆ **Community Policing Unit walk.** A 45-minute walk by at least two people from the unit a minimum of once a workday.

Engage leaders in community walks

Take an active role in planning and operationalizing community walks

- Patrol district captain with responsibility for the neighborhood develops the implementation plan and reports to executive staff on the activities and the impact.
- Patrol district lieutenant with responsibility for the neighborhood assists the captain in developing a timeline, initiating ad hoc walks for specific purposes, and ensures the plan is carried out.
- These responsibilities cannot be delegated.

Participate in community walks

- Patrol district captain with responsibility for the neighborhood and other leaders participate in walks (e.g., post-incident walk, district walk, captain walk).

Make leaders' participation transparent

- Leaders document their own participation in walks in the CAD system with the "community walk" call type, like everyone else.
- Leaders attend officer daily briefings when leading walks on that day to discuss the walk and hear from participating officers.
- During captain walks, take a patrol officer along.

19. The Danville (Virginia) Police Department has a "HEART" walk program as part of its larger community walk engagement strategies. HEART stands for Heal and Engage After Recent Trauma. The criteria for conducting the walk are that within 24 hours of a significant traumatic crime, the police department gathers a group of people together and walks in the affected community. The group includes all ranks of the police department as well as community and social service providers who offer counseling or other resources if people need them. The goal is to show the police care and provide what information they can about the investigation directly to those affected (rather than through the media).

Establish community walk accountability

Define goals with measurable outputs and outcomes

- The goal for walks is to improve the relationship between police and the community in the neighborhood.
- Outputs: Types of walks, number of walks, number of people, time spent.
- Measurement:
 - ◆ Create “community walk” call type in CAD that everyone uses.
 - ◆ Use an intranet platform for the person coordinating the walk to track additional details for each walk.
 - ◆ Take at least one picture at each walk showing a representative number of police and community members.
 - ◆ Patrol captain and lieutenant to review weekly reports of measurement data.

To change an organization’s culture and individuals’ mindsets around how community engagement is carried out, a holistic approach is vital—one that lays out a structure, expectations, and accountability.



- Outcomes: Improved cooperation, increased crime reporting, more positive interactions, and more collaboration working on problems in the neighborhood.
- Measurement:
 - ◆ Number of partnerships between the community and police
 - ◆ Number of tips received
 - ◆ Number of community member complaints
 - ◆ Perceptions of the community and police personnel about interactions and relationships

Create mechanisms

- Create and distribute the plan, expectations, and calendar for walks in the neighborhood.
- Conduct a short training on the plan and what behavior is expected on the walks, such as demeanor, things to talk about (anything you need in the neighborhood), questions to ask (did you see the game, how about the weather), as well as the purpose and what to do with any particular items provided to support engagement.
- Identify officers for whom engagement comes naturally and partner them with officers who feel less comfortable.
- Patrol captain responsible for the neighborhood has regular meetings with subordinate chain-of-command to ensure walks are being done and done correctly.
- Patrol captain responsible for the neighborhood reports progress and impact of walks in the neighborhood to executive staff along with other evidence-based crime prevention efforts in weekly and monthly accountability meetings.

Evaluate and celebrate successes

- After three months, analyze the following for the patrol captain responsible for the neighborhood to present to the executive staff:
 - ◆ Perceptions of community members in the neighborhood about the walks: how they feel about the police department and crime and safety in their neighborhood
 - ◆ Perceptions of police personnel and external partners who have done the walks about doing the walks and if they see a difference in the community relations in the neighborhood
 - ◆ Whether detectives have experienced more cooperation from people in the neighborhood in solving cases and more anonymous tips
 - ◆ The number of partnerships between members of neighborhood and the police that were developed
 - ◆ The number and type of complaints from people in the neighborhood
 - ◆ Changes in victimization in the neighborhood.
- Discuss the walk and its outcomes internally and externally.
- Market and celebrate the successes of the walks.
- Invite local media to participate and write stories regarding the walks.
- Distribute information on walks with anecdotes and quotes from officers and community members.

Conclusion

When they formalize parameters and mechanisms for a community engagement strategy's implementation, agency leadership clearly communicate the nature and purpose of the strategy to both internal personnel and the community. Within a department, leaders must articulate that strategy and convince their staff why it is meaningful and important. They must believe in the strategy to communicate its importance effectively and participate themselves. Importantly, leaders should have responses to critical comments such as "we have already tried this, and it doesn't work" or "the community policing unit already does this, why should we?"

Outside of the department, police leaders need to ensure the community environment is such that their strategy will help improve trust and legitimacy. They also need to communicate with neighborhood residents and informal leaders about what the police will be doing and why before implementation of a strategy starts.

Finally, successfully institutionalizing a community engagement strategy means that personnel understand there are expectations they will need to meet, even if a strategy changes or a new one is implemented. Eventually, doing the process over and over will normalize the holistic deployment of different community engagement strategies and the understanding that engagement is part of everyone's job responsibilities and daily work.

For answering calls for service, officers know the overall process and adapt their behavior, working with other parts of the agency, based on expectations that are developed for different types of calls (e.g., a violent robbery versus a loud noise complaint). Similarly, for community engagement, when another neighborhood with high levels of victimization is identified for community walks, or when a different community engagement strategy is identified, everyone should know the organizational process and how to implement it.



About the Center for Police Practice, Policy and Research

The mission of the Radford University Center for Police Practice, Policy and Research (CP3R) is to conduct evidence- and practice-based research, provide education and training, and contribute to the betterment of policing and the police profession. Center activities are grounded in partnerships and collaboration with police agencies and their communities. They include implementing and evaluating new and innovative strategies, providing training and technical assistance, and communicating research results and best practices through training, presentations, and publications. The center faculty comprise experts in police leadership, police/community relations, proactive crime reduction strategies, crime analysis and crime mapping, officer health and wellness, digital victimization (cybercrime), and critical incident and emergency management. Learn more at www.radford.edu/cp3r.

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, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

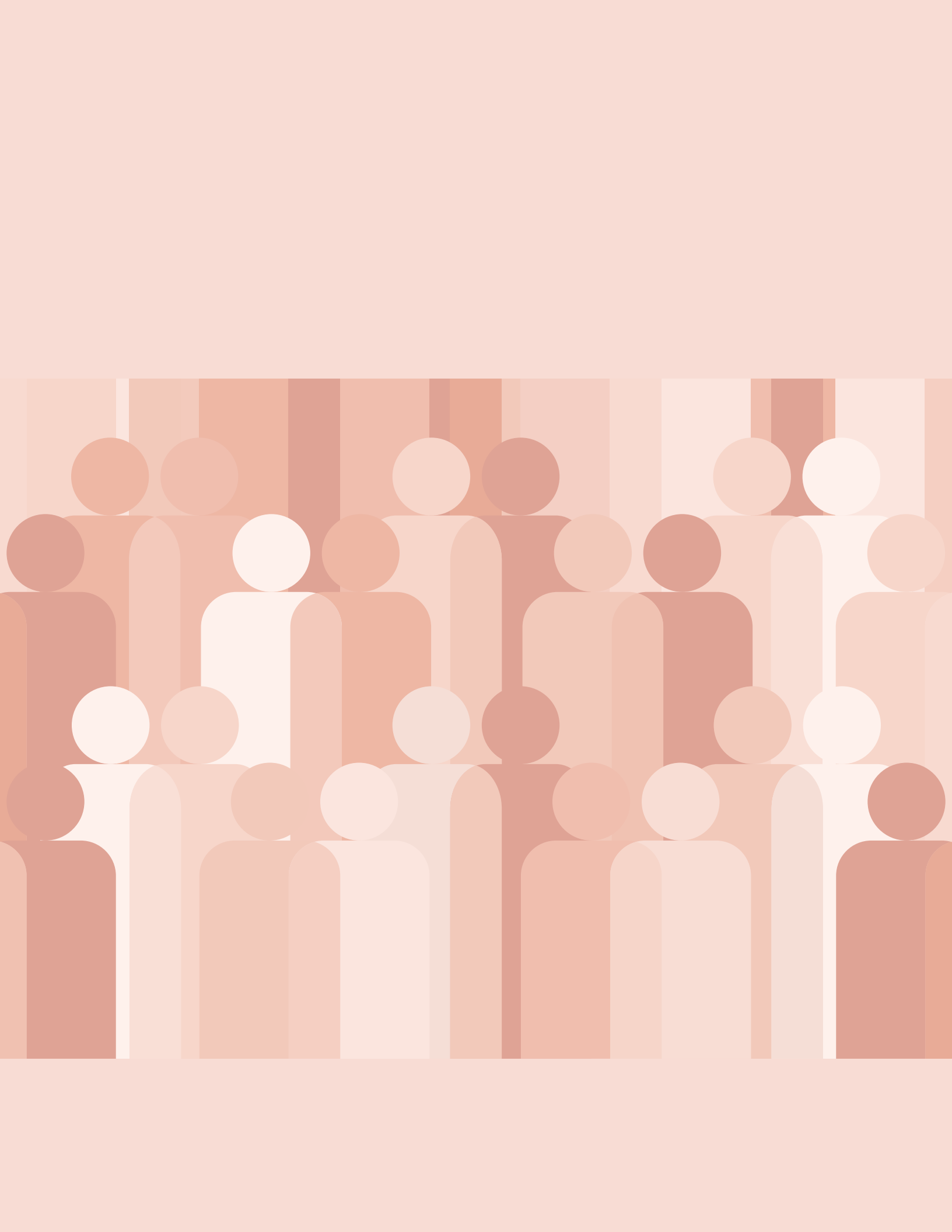
Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 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. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 136,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- Over 1,000 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.



This guide is intended to present police leaders with a framework for institutionalizing community engagement strategies to improve their personnel’s willingness to increase proactive, positive interactions with the community. It draws on the discussions from law enforcement focus groups at every rank from 14 police departments, sheriff’s offices, and state police organizations, synthesizing the results into three themes: (1) defining expectations for proactive community engagement; (2) engaging leaders in proactive community engagement; and (3) establishing proactive community engagement accountability. To illustrate how these concepts can be applied, the final section presents how a specific proactive community engagement strategy—community walks—can be holistically implemented in a neighborhood experiencing high victimization.



COPS

Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
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To obtain details about COPS Office programs, call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

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