

HOW TO ENHANCE POLICE LEGITIMACY AND REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE IN POOR, MINORITY COMMUNITIES

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In 2003, the City of Oakland awarded 10.9 million dollars to the 119 plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed by citizens charging civil rights violations and police abuses at the hands of four city police officers. Once held up as valiant anti-drug warriors, Oakland officers nicknamed “The Riders” were accused of beating and kidnapping citizens and planting evidence. As a result, the plaintiffs had been imprisoned on false charges for more than 25 years, combined. Even though the city paid to settle the case, the officers accused of gross misconduct were never found guilty. Criminal charges against two officers were dismissed in 2005; another was found not guilty; and a fourth defendant is still a wanted fugitive from the law.

The Oakland case is but one of many lawsuits concerning police misconduct filed in the United States, and the suits that make it to a judge deal with only a fraction of the abuses that communities of color have endured for decades. More than individuals suffer from such abuses – inequitable and damaging behavior by police has often caused the law and its agents to be viewed as illegitimate throughout poor minority communities. Police fairness is often doubted by minority residents, leaving their neighborhoods marked by higher rates of crime and violence than would be the case if the police were viewed as legitimate arbiters that they could trust.

Enhancing Legitimacy while Enforcing the Law

Damaging relationships between disadvantaged communities and the police are not inevitable. Studies of policing and the procedures used in the justice system find that police gain legitimacy when their interactions with community members are perceived as fair. Several key steps can be taken to build the perception of police fairness.

- **Participation:** Citizens should be given a chance to express their views, even if the comments and grievances to which they give voice do not ultimately influence the officers’ decisions.
- **Neutrality:** Decisions made by law enforcement should be unbiased, consistent from person to person and clearly based on objective facts.
- **Trustworthiness:** Officers should convey to citizens they encounter that they are acting benevolently, out of sincere concern for them and their situation.
- **Respectful treatment:** Officers should treat citizens with dignity, acknowledging and preserving their rights as fellow members of society.

An Effort to Improve Justice and Community Relations in Oakland

These insights are being used in cities, including Oakland, to address issues of urban violence while also improving the legitimacy of law and law enforcement. *Ceasefire Oakland* is the name of a program developed to reduce gun violence by building cooperative relationships among citizens, social service providers, and law enforcement officers. The program's leadership and the Oakland Police Department have instituted policies and procedures to build trust with community members.

- All Oakland police officers take part in a day-long training program that spells out how to improve interactions with community members. As part of this training, officers learn about the practical benefits they will gain from improved interactions and a growing sense of the fairness of police procedures. Benefits to police include fewer citizen complaints, more community cooperation, and less stress on the job. Community members themselves lead a training module that helps officers better understand the historical roots of widespread antipathy towards police in Oakland.
- Ceasefire meetings dubbed “call-ins” are used to disseminate anti-violence messages to community members identified as being involved with violent street groups. To foster a sense of trust and neutrality, call-ins are held in community settings such as event halls in local churches, not in legalistic settings such as courthouses or police stations.
- During call-ins, seating is arranged in a large square, instead of having speakers lined up at the front of the room. Attendees are seated between speakers, putting them on equal footing with law enforcement representatives and social service providers.
- After the Ceasefire message is delivered, attendees are given a chance to speak and are asked for feedback on the call-in meeting: “What did you hear?”, “What do you think about what you heard?”, and “What are your ideas?”. This final step gives attendees a chance to provide their perspective and allows service providers and law enforcement officials to engage community members in an informal way.

Promising Results So Far

Since its official launch in late 2012, the Ceasefire Oakland program appears to have helped to reduce gun violence. In 2013, homicides in Oakland declined by 28% compared to the previous year (dropping from 126 to 90), and nonfatal shootings declined by 16% (dropping from 557 to 469). The 2013 numbers also represent 26% fewer homicides and 11% fewer nonfatal shootings compared to averages over the previous three years.

The component of Oakland's strategy aimed at building police legitimacy has not yet been formally assessed, but research on comparable efforts in cities such as High Point, North Carolina, suggests that *not* maximizing law enforcement's legitimacy can undermine efforts to reduce gun violence. Strategies similar to Ceasefire have been effective in cities across the country, such as Boston, Chicago, and Cincinnati. It seems likely, then, that future assessments in Oakland will show that reductions in gun violence have been bolstered by efforts to counteract the corrosive relationships between disadvantaged communities and the police. As they enforce the law, police officers need to take care, day by day, to earn and preserve the trust of the communities they serve. When they do, everyone gains.