

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/police-perspectives/dealing-with-contentious-incidents>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Contentious police incidents, such as an officer-involved shooting or use of excessive force by an officer, understandably generate considerable attention from community leaders, residents, the media, and elected officials. Some of that attention can manifest itself as criticism of the action taken by the officer involved or of the agency as a whole. By taking steps to build trust and partnerships with community members *before* a contentious encounter occurs, however, police officials can ensure that their *post*-contentious encounter response is less reactive and more thoughtful.

Establishing relationships in the community before contentious incidents occur will make it easier to work collaboratively with local leaders, residents, officials, and organizations to solve problems or address negative outcomes, such as a breakdown in community trust, that may occur as a result of the incident. Here are a few strategies that officers can use to strengthen police-community relations:

Unfortunately, contentious encounters between law enforcement and communities can damage trust that has been established. After a contentious incident has occurred, law enforcement should be open and honest with the public, inform them of the facts, avoid demonizing the victim, and admit any wrongdoing on the part of the officer involved. The community should also be made aware of the agency's immediate response, including any changes to policy, practice, or officer training. Police officials can reach out to community members with whom they've already established strong partnerships and work with them as community representatives.

In addition to engaging with community members, connecting with fellow officers after a contentious encounter is also important. Officers need to feel they are supported by their colleagues and senior management. Support can mean offering leave time for officers to process an incident, organizing informal discussions for officers to discuss what they're feeling and experiencing, or making psychosocial counseling available to officers. Officers should feel included in the public messaging after a contentious encounter, particularly when information is shared with the media. Messaging should be focused on accountability and responsibility, while protecting the rights of the officers involved.

Trust is invaluable, whether between law enforcement agencies and the community they serve, or between senior police personnel and the officers they lead. By proactively engaging with the public, and fostering an environment of transparency and accountability, law enforcement officials can build a foundation of community trust that will help them manage contentious encounters when they occur.

The [Police Perspectives: Building Community Trust](#) blog series explores the importance of and provides guidance on how to build and enhance positive relationships between law enforcement agencies and the diverse communities they serve.

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