

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/police-perspectives/effective-approaches-to-connecting-with-diverse-communities>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As police officers, we are vested with an awesome amount of power and authority that must be used responsibly. In order to truly serve the public while respecting and protecting its constitutional rights we must proactively take steps to understand and respect various cultures within the communities we serve.

As an African American male growing up in a large Midwestern city, I had many contacts with the local police, very few of which were positive. During my high school years in the late 70s and early 80s, I learned that the police were not our friends and that I should avoid contact with them on the streets, regardless of the fact that I was not doing anything wrong. I frequently witnessed older boys in the neighborhood being roughed up or taken away by police officers for standing on street corners, sometimes mere feet from their own front doors.

I saw that my actions prior to an initial contact with an officer sometimes had no bearing on how the officer would treat me. When I was 16, I had just driven away from the local playground with a friend after playing football when we were stopped by two young African American police officers. Nervous and wanting to be respectful and compliant, I placed my hands on the steering wheel as the officers approached. One officer approached my window, used profanity, and ordered us out of the vehicle. They searched my vehicle for about 10 minutes before giving us back our licenses and driving away. When we returned to my vehicle, we discovered that its contents were strewn about and, in some cases, damaged. My perception of police officers was extremely negative for a while after that incident.

As I grew into adulthood, however, I began to experience more positive interactions with police officers, both African American and non-African American. I remember one instance when my brother had parked his vehicle on the street facing the wrong way during a neighborhood game of horseshoes. Two local officers stopped and inquired about the owner of the vehicle. After speaking with my brother and confirming that it was his car and that he would move it, they stayed to play us in a game of horseshoes. After we won the game and my brother moved his car, they shook our hands and left the area laughing. I learned that the negative experiences I had with police officers in the past were with unprofessional individuals who happened to be police officers, and that not all officers were bad. I also learned that officers can sometimes use their discretion in how they respond to non-emergency situations and that they can choose to handle a situation with positivity and respect. This change in my perception of the police, along with the influence of certain police officers, led me to join the Michigan State Police in 1988. I wanted to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the community and positively change the perceptions of others who may have had negative experiences with police officers in the past. I vowed to always make a conscious effort to treat all persons with dignity and respect, even when I had to arrest or use physical force on them.

In my early years as a trooper, I worked in rural communities and found that developing professional relationships with members of various community organizations attending their events, responding to requests for special appearances and speaking engagements fosters a level of mutual trust and understanding that is extremely valuable during critical incidents, civil disturbances, and criminal investigations. Police officers are better equipped to resolve issues if relationships have already been established with community leaders and representatives.

Many officers, commanders, and agency heads contend that we represent the law, and that the public can either obey it or face the consequences. However, I can tell you from my own experiences as a young man and law enforcement official that this approach is short-sighted. Officers are called upon to handle many issues that cannot be resolved by simply enforcing laws and making arrests. By regularly and proactively connecting with residents and community stakeholders, police can foster a spirit of cooperation with the public that leads to healthier families, safer streets, and stronger communities.

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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