

TESTIMONY of
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STRATEGIES for YOUTH
In
Support of Training for Law Enforcement Officers
that
Supports Strong Police/Youth Interactions
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The Need:

In 2018, about 1/6th of all Americans are under the age of 18. Approximately 57 of 74 million youth receive free and reduced lunch. Annually, over 80% of the children and youth placed in foster care are there due to neglect. The toxic stress of poverty, and the level of violence that often accompanies it, triggers mental health issues in many American children.

It is also worth noting, that American children, perhaps more than any other group, are regulated and under the purview of multiple state agencies and subject to an array of regulations. This renders siloed responses that are highly problematic.

In short, the kids are not alright.

Officers are first social responders, and when they arrive on the scene, they are increasingly faced with tricky situations that require more skills. That's why we need officers who are trained to use developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, racially equitable approaches. We need officers and law enforcement agencies to partner with youth and family serving community-based organizations.

Nebraska Law Enforcement [Training](#) for Policing Youth

Today Nebraska spends only 6 hours training officers in the academy on juvenile justice matters. That's 6 out of a total of 600 hours recruits spend in the academy. And by all reports, any in-service training thereafter is on a voluntary basis.

In addition, Nebraska school resource officers are not required to attend special training to work with youth, even though they routinely encounter disabled youth and youth with serious emotional behavioral disorders, protected by federal law. This is not enough.

Unless we designate others with those skills willing to answer 911 calls for the majority of requests that have nothing to do with crime and have more to do with social dysfunctions and stresses, *it is vital to commit to training law enforcement with more skills for working with our youth.*

Nebraska Law Enforcement Agency Policies for Policing Youth

And while training is necessary, it is not sufficient. All law enforcement agencies and officers need policies that distinguish law enforcement responses to youth from those used with adults.

But the state of Nebraska does not offer local law enforcement agencies comprehensive model policies for youth interactions. Indeed, some agencies have no policies guiding law enforcement responses to youth, and even fewer have policies that guide officers' conduct when policing school.

This exposes law enforcement officers and agencies to liability. It produces uneven results within and across agencies. And these different outcomes often give rise to inferences of racial and other kinds of bias when analyzing arrest data.

Current Approaches to Policing Youth:

The results of the absence of training and policies are stark: high rates of arrest for minor juvenile offenses, profound racial disparities in arrest, and arrest of students with disabilities in the state's public schools.

Research shows that the way officers have historically been trained to interact with youth by intimidating them into not committing offenses, *actually increases delinquency*. Half a dozen studies in the last 5 years have demonstrated that when youth who are not engaged in wrongdoing are stopped, questioned and robbed of the benefit of the doubt, they are more likely to engage in delinquent acts. Unlike adults who see the risk of misconduct, youth see such approaches as a gauntlet to run, a challenge to provoke and triumph over. Public safety is harmed and this approach contributes to vicious cycles of over-policing, without improvement to public safety outcomes.

For these reasons, Strategies for Youth strongly recommends that Nebraska actively embrace and provide meaningful support to youth and officers by training officers in developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, racially equitable police practices.

Strategies for Youth's Solutions:

Strategies for Youth is a national, nonprofit training and policy organization dedicated to improving police/youth interactions and reducing disproportionate minority contact (DMC). Our goal is to increase officers' and law enforcement agencies' developmental competence, to understand this challenging age group in a way that keeps expectations of youth high while teaching youth the skills they need to live in civil society.

Since 2010, we began working in 2 states and now work in 18. This reflects the demand of communities and the recognition of law enforcement leaders and officers of the need to addressing the perplexing challenges they meet with youth and families daily.

School resource and patrol officers in Omaha have an appetite for better understanding youth. We also saw that the state is depriving officers of the information and tactics

they need to effectively police Nebraskan youth and save precious law enforcement and correctional system resources.

Giving Officers' Insight & Skills: *Policing the Teen Brain*

At a typical *Policing the Teen Brain* training, SFY-trained psychologists who work with youth, presented officers with information on what's going on in the teen brain:

- Normative adolescent development to explain why the phase of adolescence is so rife with challenges to good decision making and the power of peers, **why self-image trumps self-interest**;
- Youth compromised by mental illness, the onset of which often occurs during adolescence, and which youth too often address by using drugs to help their struggles for equanimity while tormented by thoughts they cannot control;
- Trauma and its prevalence among our nation's youth, who are increasingly exposed in every aspect of their life by threats to their own and their loved one's safety at levels remarkable for a country that is not at war. We demonstrate how the four most prevalent responses to trauma, fleeing, fighting, freezing, and re-enacting, can be wrongly interpreted as guilt a when youth are focused on a struggle to survive.

When we train school resource officers, we add additional components to our training to ensure they learn about:

- **Emotional behavioral disorders**, ranging from autism to severe PTSD, which make self-regulation close to impossible for some youth and require concerted responses on the part of adults to address;
- The behaviors **youth with learning disorders** use to distract people from their inadequacies, behaviors which range from self-harming to disruptive,
- We demonstrate how arresting youth experiencing these challenges does not reduce their problematic behavior but does increase the likelihood that they will leave school,
- And we provide officers with basic knowledge of the **legal protections** to which youth are entitled.

We also discuss the external factors that affect youth behaviors including:

- The level of **socioeconomic stress** youth experience daily with parents who are not earning enough to take care of their family, or parents who are not able to care,
- The **cultural messages** that directly contradict and compete with the messages of authority figures,
- The role of **implicit bias** and profiling by proxy where officers are used to impose callers' biased agendas,
- And we provide officers opportunities to **meet and connect with youth-serving providers** to whom they can refer youth and families,

We conclude trainings with an opportunity for officers to engage in skits with youth. This is the point at which many officers say, "The light bulb went off." In these skits, officers

see firsthand how certain assertions of authority produce compliance, and others make it hard won and make youth lose respect for officers.

Officers routinely tell us 3 things after each training:

1. "I wish I'd learned this in the academy."
2. "I had no idea all these services existed in the communities where I police."
3. "I feel better equipped to work with youth."

Officers learn skills they can immediately apply with youth on the streets, in schools, when responding to calls for service. Officers learn to avoid arresting youth in distress. They learn how to de-escalate situations that typically explode when they rely solely on yelling "CALM DOWN." Officers learn to develop relationships in which youth do not want to disappoint them, and run to them for solace, not from them in fear.

Conclusion:

The top 5 reasons to promote training officers to work with youth include:

1. Promote respect for law enforcement among youth, who give respect when they feel they are being given a voice, shown care, concern, and fairness.
2. Reduce arrests of youth for minor offenses like disorderly conduct by emphasizing a youth's accountability to the officer instead of to an anonymous and meaningless system.
3. Reduce officers' frustration with a juvenile justice system that does not address the underlying reasons for which they come in contact with youth,
4. Increase the network of supports for youth living in need and in risk, for whom police cannot and should not be the sole response,
5. And to see positive outcomes for youth, including the opportunity to live healthy, independent lives for Nebraska youth.

Thank you for considering our views.

Please call Strategies for Youth at 617-714-3789 or explore our website:
www.strategiesforyouth.org

SFY Resources:

First, Do No Harm: How Educators & Police Can Work Together More Effectively to Preserve School Safety & Protect Vulnerable Students, <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/261>

Controlling Partners: http://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Thurau_Wald_54-4.pdf

If Not Now, When? A Survey of Juvenile Justice Training in America's Police Academies, 2013. http://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/SFYReport_02-2013_rev.pdf

First, Do No Harm: Practices for Law Enforcement Agencies When Arresting Parents in the Presence of Children, 2012. http://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/First_Do_No_Harm_Report.pdf

Where's the State? Creating & Implementing State Standards for Law Enforcement Interactions with Youth, 2017, http://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/SFY_StandardsReport_053117.pdf

Parents' Checklist for SROs, 2018, https://strategiesforyouth.org/sfysite/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ParentGuide-SROs-InSchool_091917.pdf