

Tension and Disparities In Treatment Of Youth In Low-Income Communities Of Color



Youth of color in low-income urban neighborhoods often express negative views toward law enforcement. Youth of color generally experience higher rates of contact and more negative contact. Arrest remains the point of largest racial disparity in the juvenile justice system.

Negative views of law enforcement

Surveys regularly find that urban youth have negative views toward law enforcement and frequently report that officers treat youth in disrespectful or abusive ways

- In a Chicago survey, just one-sixth of public high school students agreed that, “The police care about what is good for my neighborhood.” Less than one-fifth agreed that, “The police treat most individuals fairly.”
- Similar perceptions have emerged from youth surveys in St. Louis, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York.
- One recent survey of 1,000 children aged 7-14 in Southern California found that Black and Latino children’s positive perceptions of police begin to drop between the ages of 7-9, and that youth today are growing up in an “era of mistrust” of police, resulting in a “crisis of legitimacy.”

Informed by personal experiences

To a significant degree, these negative attitudes are informed by young people’s personal experiences with law enforcement. Consider the results of just these three studies:

- Nearly half of black and white teens surveyed in three distressed St. Louis neighborhoods said they had personally been harassed or mistreated by law enforcement officers, and 60% said they knew someone who had been mistreated.
- In Chicago, 40% of the youth reported that they had personally observed other youth stopped by police and treated disrespectfully.

Demographic and attitudinal divide

In part, mistrust is fueled by a continuing demographic and attitudinal divide between law enforcement personnel and residents of low-income neighborhoods.

- In 2013, *Governing Magazine* found that racial and ethnic minorities were underrepresented in nearly every law enforcement agency in the nation serving at least 100,000 residents. Blacks, Hispanics and other minority groups are underrepresented by a combined 24%.
- In a January 2017 nationwide survey of law enforcement personnel by the Pew Research Center, six in ten white officers, but only 29% of black officers, said that police have good relations with blacks in the communities they serve.

Improving community relations is critical

Increasingly, and especially in the wake of recent policing controversies involving use of force on people of color, law enforcement leaders are recognizing that improving community relations is critical to their effectiveness in combatting crime and protecting public safety.

Opportunities for JDAI leaders

This situation can create opportunities for JDAI leaders in their efforts to engage law enforcement, since JDAI steering committees can provide a forum for constructive dialogue between law enforcement and leaders in marginalized communities.

Source Note: Citations for all information and quotations in this handout can be found in the chapter of the practice guide entitled, “Getting Acquainted: What JDAI Leaders Should Know About Law Enforcement.”