Beyond the Conversation:
Ensuring Meaningful Police-Community Engagement

Policing Project
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POLICE FOUNDATION

National Urban League

Introduction

In recent years, law enforcement officials and community leaders alike have stressed the need for more "engagement" between the public and the police. In particular, they have called on departments and community members to work collaboratively to keep communities safe.

But how much engagement is really happening? And what does it mean for police departments to truly "engage" with the residents they serve?

"Community engagement" has come to describe everything from ice cream socials to serious discussions about department practices. All of these forms of police-community interaction are important for building relationships and improving trust.

But real engagement is more than just conversation.
It means giving the public a voice in how their communities
are policed.

Some departments across the country have taken important steps toward this sort of engagement. They have asked the public for input on policies and practices, involved community members in strategic planning, and engaged in collaborative problem-solving.

Their experiences make clear that this engagement with the public over matters of substance presents a number of challenges. It takes resources and planning. Often the communities who are most affected by various practices

also can be the most difficult to reach to include in the conversation. The conversations themselves can be difficult; they require a willingness on the part of both police officials and community members to work collaboratively.

But despite its challenges, this kind of engagement is essential. Inviting community input on substantive issues ensures that policing practices truly reflect community priorities and needs. Simply having the conversations can build greater trust and legitimacy with the public. Further, a truly democratic society all but requires that the public have a say in what police do.

THIS STUDY

Although any number of departments have taken concrete steps to engage their communities, we know little about the extent of these efforts—and still less about what works.

Our use of force and body-worn camera policies "directly affected our interactions with the public. It was vital to gain their input so as to increase credibility and legitimacy, and to show that the community was seen as a joint stakeholder in the process." – Austin Police Dept.

Together, the Policing Project, the Police Foundation, and the National Urban League have launched a study to fill this gap.

As a first step, we created a survey to learn more about what departments currently are doing to engage the public. The Police Foundation distributed the questionnaire to its extensive network of law enforcement partners. The National Urban League asked each of its 88 affiliates to share the survey with the many groups with whom they work. All three partners actively promoted the project on social media.

Altogether, we received responses from 128 law enforcement agencies and 239 community members (answering either for themselves or on behalf of a community organization). We heard from some of the nation's largest police departments, as well as from smaller agencies in suburban or rural areas.

Because we only heard from those departments and community members who chose to participate, these findings cannot represent all police agencies and communities. Throughout this report, we have been careful to frame our conclusions and recommendations with this limitation in mind.

Key Findings

01.

Virtually all participating police departments are taking steps to connect with members of the public, including by hosting meetings, attending forums, and using social media.

02.

Many of these efforts are aimed at building relations with the community, as opposed to engagement that enables members of the public to provide input on policing policies and practices. In other words, there has been a great deal of *community interaction*, but much less in the way of *true engagement*.

03.

Community members overwhelmingly said that they want more opportunities to weigh in on department policies and practices. This finding suggests that agencies that do not currently involve the public in these sorts of decisions are missing a critical opportunity to build legitimacy and trust.

Taking Stock Of Community Engagement

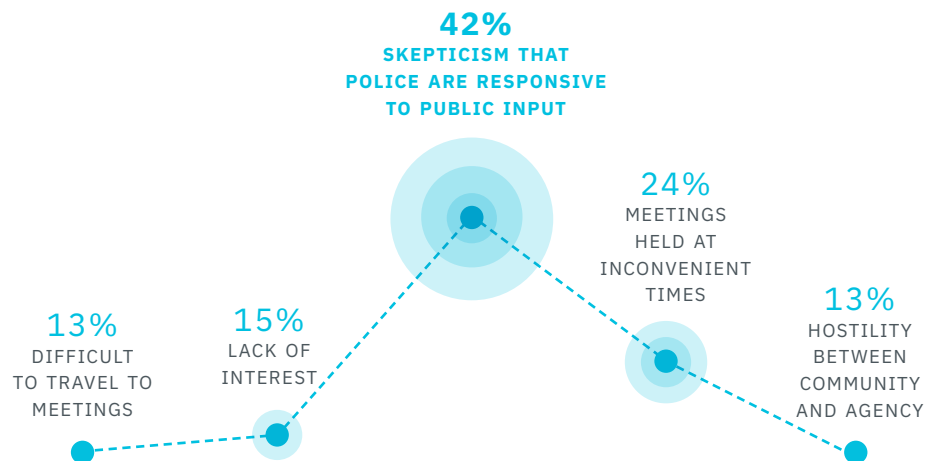## COMMUNITY MEMBERS WANT REAL ENGAGEMENT

The community members who took the survey overwhelmingly said that they want to have a say in key policing decisions. More than 70% reported that they would "very likely" respond if asked for feedback on departmental policies and practices, as well as on decisions to adopt new technologies.

Likelihood that Community Members will Provide Feedback on Departmental Policies or Adopting Technology:

POLICIES
TECH

	VERY LIKELY	SOMEWHAT LIKELY	NOT LIKELY
POLICIES	73%	21%	6%
TECH	73%	23%	4%
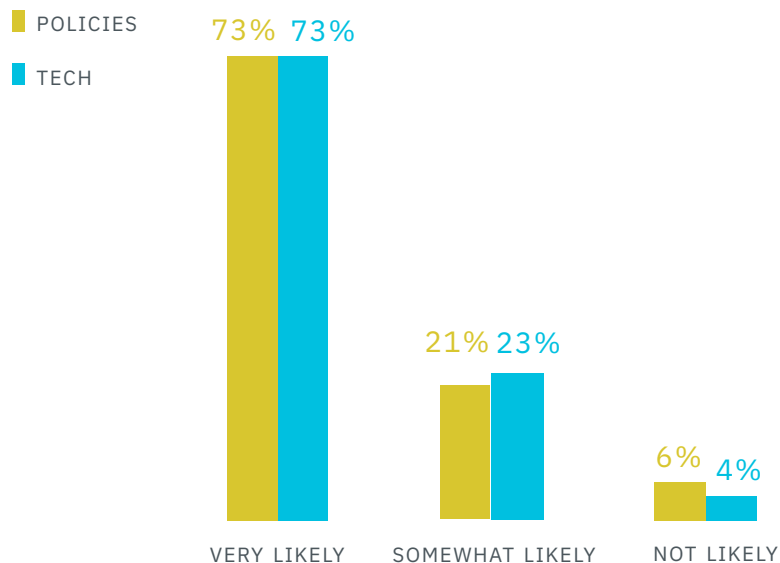
Asked if there were any obstacles to this sort of engagement, community members pointed primarily to one factor: concern that police officials would not be responsive to their input. One respondent summarized the point: "The police talk to us a lot, but their actions don't change."

42%
SKEPTICISM THAT
POLICE ARE RESPONSIVE
TO PUBLIC INPUT

24%
MEETINGS
HELD AT
INCONVENIENT
TIMES

13%
HOSTILITY
BETWEEN
COMMUNITY
AND AGENCY

13%
DIFFICULT
TO TRAVEL TO
MEETINGS

15%
LACK OF
INTEREST

This skepticism is particularly noteworthy because most of the community members who took the survey had at least some experience working with their local policing agencies. Many said that they had attended beat meetings or community forums, discussed policing issues at community events, or interacted with the police over social media. They represented a variety of advocacy and community-based organizations, including groups that provide social services, educational services, and youth empowerment programs. By and large, they expressed favorable views of the police. And still they were skeptical.
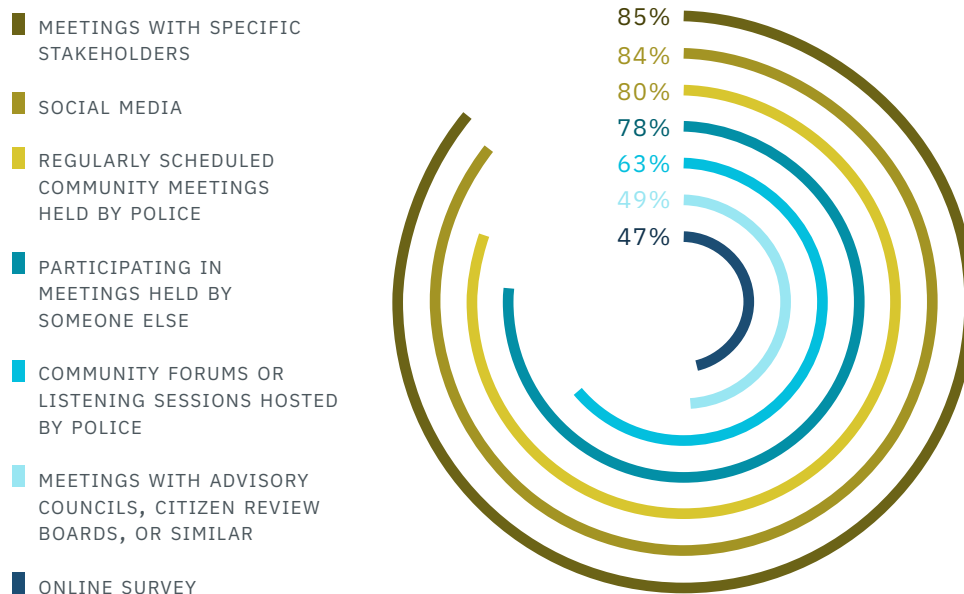
In short, respondents were eager to work with their police departments. But they wanted more opportunities to weigh in on matters of substance—and to know that their views would in fact be taken into account.

HOW DEPARTMENTS ENGAGE THEIR COMMUNITIES

Nearly all of the departments that took the survey are engaging their communities in some way.

The vast majority of departments reported that they meet directly with stakeholders, hold regular district or beat-level meetings, and attend meetings organized by other community groups. Departments also are active on social media.

Most departments rely on a mix of strategies to hear from different constituencies. About 80% of departments reported using four or more mechanisms to receive public feedback.
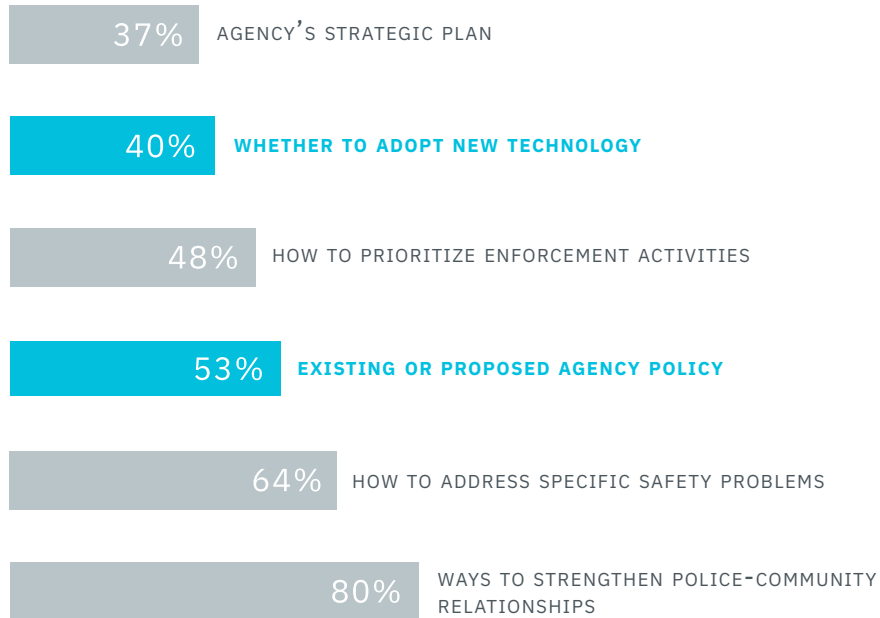
■ MEETINGS WITH SPECIFIC STAKEHOLDERS

■ SOCIAL MEDIA

■ REGULARLY SCHEDULED COMMUNITY MEETINGS HELD BY POLICE

■ PARTICIPATING IN MEETINGS HELD BY SOMEONE ELSE

■ COMMUNITY FORUMS OR LISTENING SESSIONS HOSTED BY POLICE

■ MEETINGS WITH ADVISORY COUNCILS, CITIZEN REVIEW BOARDS, OR SIMILAR

■ ONLINE SURVEY

85%
84%
80%
78%
63%
49%
47%

Mechanisms of Community Engagement:

THE NEED FOR MORE SUBSTANTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Although departments are taking steps to interact with the public, much of this engagement is aimed at building relationships between the department and the community—a critical first step in community interaction. However, more could be done to give the public a meaningful say in how their neighborhoods are policed.

53% of agencies reported asking for the public's input on agency policies, and just 40% sought input before adopting new technologies. Asked if they planned to seek this sort of input in the future, only 43% of departments said they were "very likely" to do so on matters of policy, and fewer still on decisions about new technologies.

37% AGENCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN

40% WHETHER TO ADOPT NEW TECHNOLOGY

48% HOW TO PRIORITIZE ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES

53% EXISTING OR PROPOSED AGENCY POLICY

64% HOW TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC SAFETY PROBLEMS

80% WAYS TO STRENGTHEN POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

Survey responses may actually overstate the degree of substantive engagement that occurs. Fewer than two-thirds of the agencies that reported asking for public input on substantive topics listed a specific policy or practice on which input was sought. And just under half said that they actually made policy changes in response to the feedback they received. Indeed, several departments emphasized that their goal was to educate the public about policy choices that had already been made, rather than to incorporate the community's concerns.
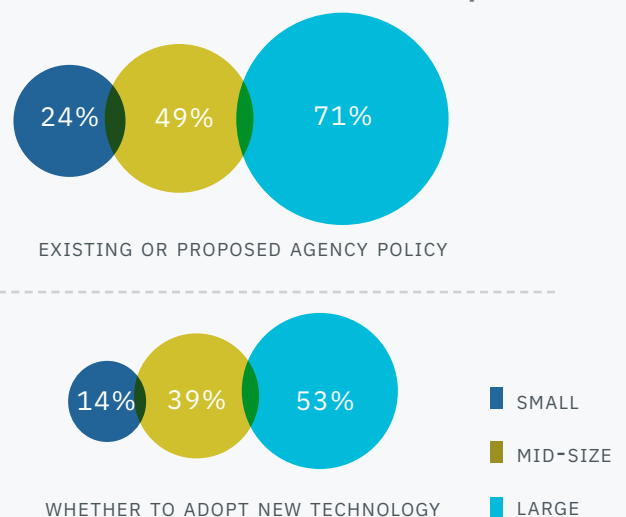
Differences in Engagement Based on Agency Size:

Larger agencies were much more likely to engage the public on substantive policy matters than were smaller agencies with 50 or fewer officers.

It may be that smaller agencies have fewer resources to devote to this sort of engagement. Community dynamics in smaller jurisdictions also may differ.

One of the goals of this study is to identify specific models of engagement that work for departments and communities of different sizes and needs.

Agencies that Asked for Public Input:

24%   49%   71%

EXISTING OR PROPOSED AGENCY POLICY

14%   39%   53%

WHETHER TO ADOPT NEW TECHNOLOGY
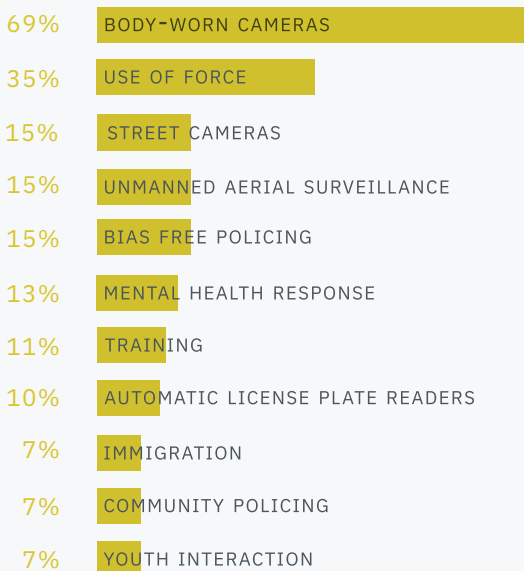
■ SMALL
■ MID-SIZE
■ LARGE

Community member responses suggest that members of the public want to participate in agency decision-making. Departments that do not routinely ask for this sort of input—or do so in a cursory manner—are missing a critical opportunity to build legitimacy and trust.

Still, it was encouraging to see that several agencies—particularly in larger jurisdictions—are taking important steps to involve their communities in key decisions. Twenty-one agencies reported seeking feedback on five or more different policies or technologies. In written responses, a number of officials highlighted the importance of this sort of engagement. One official explained, "Technology adoption stirs public concerns and raises significant privacy issues. By including our community, we can better serve their needs and are more likely to earn their trust." Another said, "The use of force policy has a significant impact on the community. We felt we needed to understand our community groups' input and suggestions."

"Transparency is of utmost importance in maintaining public trust. Due to the privacy concerns that many have expressed about the use of automated video recording technologies, it was important to gain input from the public as well as community advocacy groups before developing and implementing policies governing their use."

– Los Angeles Sheriff's Dept.

69%	BODY-WORN CAMERAS
35%	USE OF FORCE
15%	STREET CAMERAS
15%	UNMANNED AERIAL SURVEILLANCE
15%	BIAS FREE POLICING
13%	MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE
11%	TRAINING
10%	AUTOMATIC LICENSE PLATE READERS
7%	IMMIGRATION
7%	COMMUNITY POLICING
7%	YOUTH INTERACTION

Policies on Which Agencies have Asked for Public Input:

Among the departments that sought input on policies and practices, most did so on a narrow set of topics. The most common topic by far—mentioned by 69% of agencies—was body-worn cameras. Many agencies also asked for public input around the use of force.
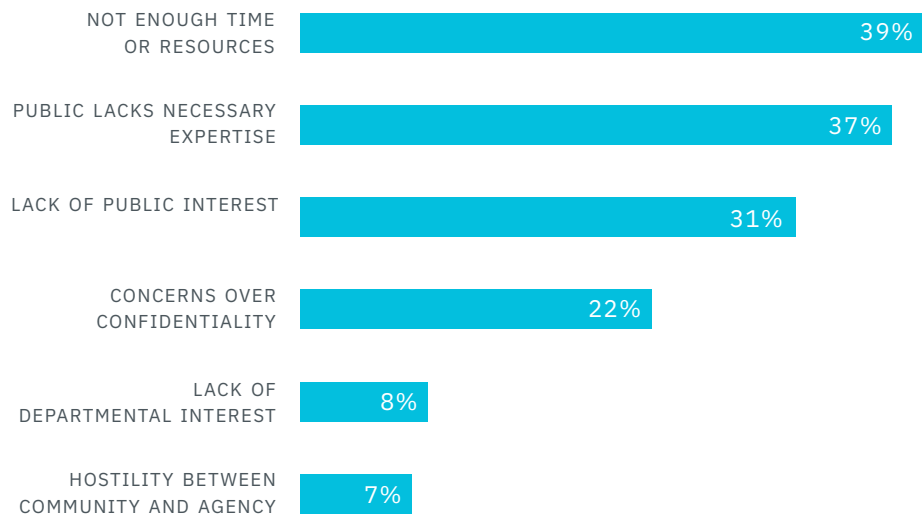
Given the national attention these two topics have attracted, it is not surprising that these are the subjects for which departments made the greatest effort to engage. The hope is that this sort of engagement becomes routine across a variety of policy areas.

What accounts for the lack of substantive engagement? Undoubtedly, part of the answer has to do with the fact that decisions about policing policy and practice traditionally have been left to police executives. It is perhaps telling that nearly one third of agencies thought that the public lacks interest in providing input on policies and practices—while community responses suggest this simply is not the case.

Still, departments and communities will need to address a number of obstacles if this sort of engagement is to become routine. Agencies reported that two of the biggest challenges are a lack of departmental resources and concerns that the public lacks the necessary expertise to weigh in on policy matters. The two factors are reciprocal: in order to offer meaningful input, the community members need to have a baseline level of technical understanding; agencies could educate lay audiences on technical considerations, but doing so takes time and resources.

Factors that Discourage Departments from Further Engagement:

NOT ENOUGH TIME OR RESOURCES	39%
PUBLIC LACKS NECESSARY EXPERTISE	37%
LACK OF PUBLIC INTEREST	31%
CONCERNS OVER CONFIDENTIALITY	22%
LACK OF DEPARTMENTAL INTEREST	8%
HOSTILITY BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND AGENCY	7%

Community members also pointed to a number of logistical hurdles, such as the time and location of meetings. Some specifically mentioned that meetings were inaccessible or uninviting. One community member wrote, "I think [the police] have to come up with more venues to meet citizens in the community that are distrustful of law enforcement." Others hoped that the police would "engage the community at their level" and hold meetings "in high crime areas."

Where Do We Go From Here?

It is clear that police departments care about building positive, meaningful relationships with the communities they serve. That commitment is borne out by the many meetings, forums, and listening sessions that departments already host and attend.

At the same time, our preliminary findings suggest that there is a great deal more that agencies can do to involve the public in key decisions about department policies and practices. What agencies need are models for how to do so effectively—and in a way that is sensitive to the unique challenges and needs of policing.

Following this survey, the Policing Project, Police Foundation, and National Urban League will conduct site visits to jurisdictions across the country to learn more about promising examples of engagement that involves the community in policing decisions, and to identify best practices tailored to agencies of different sizes and needs.

Our goal is to highlight strategies that address some of the key obstacles to effective engagement, including:

01.

Hearing from all affected communities:

What are effective strategies for gathering input from individuals who do not routinely attend community meetings or otherwise communicate with police? How can police officials reach marginalized communities, or those distrustful of law enforcement?

02.

Educating the public to ensure informed and meaningful input:

Some policies can be highly technical. How can police departments explain the key tradeoffs involved? Can community organizations or university partners help provide resources to frame the debate?

03.

Overcoming staffing and resource constraints:

Real engagement takes time. How can agencies with limited resources still ensure that they hear a range of community perspectives? To what extent can advisory councils and other auxiliary bodies serve as "force multipliers" to help agencies hear from a broader cross-section of the community?

04.

Deciding when to engage:

At what point in the policymaking process should agencies ask for the public's views? Community members often complain that agencies invite input only after all the key decisions have been made. At the same time, having a concrete proposal on the table can help frame the discussion and ensure a more meaningful exchange of views. Are there particular engagement strategies that are best suited for getting input at different stages in the process?

By addressing these and similar questions, we hope to assist departments to develop engagement strategies that are actionable, equitable, and tailored to the particular needs of their communities.