COMMUNITY TRUST AND JUSTICE BRIEFS ORIENTED

# RECONCILIATION

*Reconciliation* is a method of facilitating frank engagements between minority and other alienated communities and police or other authorities in order to reset relationships impaired by historical tensions, grievances, and misconceptions. Respect, collaboration, and effective working relationships between police and the communities they serve are central to both community safety and effective policing. However, in many communities where serious crime is concentrated, mutual mistrust and misunderstanding prevent police and communities from working together.

The reconciliation framework recognizes the very real American history of abusive law enforcement practices toward minority communities, beginning with slavery and the perception that even legal enforcement may have been poorly motivated and disrespectful. It recognizes the concerns law enforcement has about communities, including, for example, the "stop snitching" codes that protect violent offenders. It also recognizes the reality and the power of the sometimes damaging narratives each side has about the other.

Many people in minority communities affected by high levels of violent crime and disorder genuinely believe that police are using drug laws and other law enforcement resources as means to oppress them. Their alienation is fueled by the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and other legal oppression of minorities; high levels of intrusive police tactics like stop-and-frisk; disrespectful behavior by police; and police shootings and other violence. When these communities are furious with the police, they are not inclined to work with the criminal justice system or speak out publicly against violence and crime. Serious offenders may wrongly believe that their own communities tolerate or even support their behavior.

## Further reading


Kennedy, D.M. 2010. Practice Brief: *Norms, Narratives, and Community Engagement for Crime Prevention*. New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Mentel, Z. 2012. *Racial Reconciliation, Truth Telling and Police Legitimacy*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.


Conversely, some in law enforcement genuinely believe that troubled minority communities are broadly tolerant of—and even complicit in—crime and violence. In fact, both research and national field experience clearly show that high-crime minority communities are the least tolerant of crime and disorder[1] and that in the most apparently dangerous communities the overwhelming majority of people do not behave violently.[2] However, where police believe otherwise, they are more inclined to treat entire communities as criminal and employ aggressive and intrusive tactics.

The process of reconciliation addresses these deeply troubled relationships through engagement between law enforcement and community members about the long American history of legal abuse of minorities; the fact that traditional law enforcement has sometimes been both ineffective and caused unintentional damage to individuals, families, and communities; the fact that police have often treated minority individuals and communities with disrespect; and the sincere desire of law enforcement to act differently and do better. In turn, if there is to be community safety, there must be an engagement about the central importance of clear and powerful community norms


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against violence and other serious crime, and an effective working relationship with law enforcement.

The aim of reconciliation is for communities and law enforcement to come to a position of respect and trust by recognizing real historical harms and experiences, recognizing that that both have been contributing to harms neither desires, addressing misunderstandings, and finding common ground and a mutually supported way forward.

As an initial step in this process, high-level police executives have been willing to make powerful public statements acknowledging history and seeking to foster reconciliation efforts. NYPD Police Chief William J. Bratton, for example, has embraced these ideas and has spoken about them publicly. As Bratton said in remarks at a symposium in 2015:

> *"Some of the worst parts of black history would have been impossible without a perverted, oppressive law and order, too. Slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, lynchings, blockbusting. None of us did these things. None of us were troopers on the bridge at Selma. But it doesn't matter that these things happened before many of us were even born. What matters is that our history follows us like a second shadow. We can never underestimate the impact these had. The hate, and the injustice, and the lost opportunities–for all of us. But where does this leave us, the police? Because law and order should never be the tool of oppression, not today. And while unfairness and inequality persist, we, as police, face a truth that some others would rather deny [. . . .] We cannot forget what is behind us, nor the legacies still with us–but we cannot ignore the duty laid before us. As police, that duty is two-fold: As police, we must prevent crime and disorder. As police, we must fix what we've done and what we continue to do wrong. It's ours to set right. It's the crisis, it's the challenge, it's the opportunity."*[3]

The National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice seeks to build on existing reconciliation practices, employ them on a wider geographic scale in cities, and adapt them to different racial and ethnic communities, youth, victims of crime, and the LGBTQI community.

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## Endnotes

1. R.J. Sampson and D.J. Bartusch, "Legal Cynicism and (Subcultural?) Tolerance of Deviance: The Neighborhood Context of Racial Differences," *Law and Society Review* 32 (1998), 777–804.

2. Andrew V. Papachristos, "Murder by Structure: Dominance Relations and the Social Structure of Gang Homicide," *American Journal of Sociology* 115, no. 1 (2009), 74–128; Andrew V. Papachristos, Tracey L. Meares, and Jeffrey Fagan, "Attention Felons: Evaluation Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago," *Journal of Empirical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2007), 223–272.

3. William J. Bratton, "Remarks" (lecture, William R. Bracey CEO Symposium, National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, Atlanta, GA, March 13, 2015). http://trustandjustice.org/resources/article/william-bratton-remarks-at-noble-friday-march-13-atlanta-ga.



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