



# **COPS** *INNOVATIONS*

COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

## **Policing in New Immigrant Communities**



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This project was supported by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice and the Vera Institute of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement of a product by the authors or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.

The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of this publication. Given that URLs and web sites are in constant flux, neither the author nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.





### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors thank the focus group participants for their time and energy in discussing this important issue. Their commitment to working with immigrant communities through community policing principles was clear during this provocative discussion. Special thanks also to Susan Shah of the Vera Institute of Justice for moderating the session and handling many logistical details.





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### INTRODUCTION

The United States is becoming increasingly diverse as people emigrate from around the world seeking opportunities. The multicultural society this is generating presents new challenges for law enforcement. Recent immigrants can be both more vulnerable to crime and less likely to report it to law enforcement. Local police departments often feel blindsided by the rapidly growing pace of diversity in their communities and, therefore, have little comfort dealing with policing in this environment.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) is the federal leader in advancing community policing, which aims to improve cooperation among law enforcement professionals and the people they are sworn to serve and protect. In the fall of 2008, the COPS Office assembled a number of police and community leaders into a focus group to discuss how law enforcement and new immigrants can cultivate, maintain, and restore partnerships aimed at keeping communities safe. The day-and-a-half-long meeting included police leaders and community representatives from five jurisdictions: Brooklyn Park, Minnesota; Clark County, Ohio; Lowell, Massachusetts; Nashville, Tennessee; and Prince William County, Virginia. The discussion, held in the New York City office of the Vera Institute of Justice, was moderated by Susan Shah, a program director in Vera's Center on Immigration and Justice.

This report, based on that discussion, provides an overview of common challenges to effective police-immigrant relations. It also offers promising approaches—which serve as recommendations—for building trust and mutual respect between law enforcement and new immigrant communities. The rest of this report is organized into five sections, beginning with a summary of common challenges. This is followed by sections on promising internal police practices, building police-immigrant community relationships, dealing with immigration enforcement actions, and, finally, moving forward.



### Participants

Brooklyn Park, Minnesota ([www.brooklynpark.org/sitepages/pid67.php](http://www.brooklynpark.org/sitepages/pid67.php))

- Michael Davis, Chief, Brooklyn Park Police Department
- Miamen Wopea, Family Programs Specialist, NorthWest Suburban Integration School District; Liberian community representative

Clark County, Ohio ([www.clarkcountysheriff.com](http://www.clarkcountysheriff.com))

- Lieutenant Donald Lucas, Division Commander, Uniform Patrol Division, Clark County Sheriff's Office
- Miguel Ten, President/CEO, First Diversity Staffing Group; Latino community representative

Lowell, Massachusetts ([www.lowellpolice.com](http://www.lowellpolice.com))

- Kenneth Lavallee, Superintendent of Police, Lowell Police Department
- Jennifer Ball, Director of Research and Evaluation, Lowell Police Department
- Sayon Soeun, Executive Director, Light of Cambodian Children, Inc.; Cambodian community representative

Nashville, Tennessee ([www.police.nashville.gov](http://www.police.nashville.gov))

- Mike Alexander, South Precinct Commander, Metropolitan Nashville Police Department
- Maria Valentin-Pridgen, Owner, Acento Consulting; President of the Citizen's Advisory Committee for El Protector, Metropolitan Nashville Police Department; Latino community representative

Prince William County, Virginia

([www.pwccgov.org/default.aspx?topic=040074](http://www.pwccgov.org/default.aspx?topic=040074))

- Charlie Deane, Chief, Prince William County Police Department
- Carlos Castro, Owner, Los Todos Hispanic Supermarkets; Latino community representative

COPS Office ([www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov))

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- Matt Lysakowski, Social Science Analyst, the COPS Office

*For details about the promising practices described in this publication, contact the specific law enforcement agency for additional information.*



### COMMON CHALLENGES

Regardless of the type of immigrant communities they serve, the law enforcement agencies represented at the focus group dealt with similar challenges:

- Large numbers of people who do not speak English well
- Reluctance among immigrants to report crime
- Immigrants' fear of the police
- Effects of federal immigration enforcement actions
- Confusion among immigrants over whether and to what extent local police enforce immigration laws
- Misunderstandings based on cultural differences
- Personal interactions between immigrants and police officers that damage goodwill and trust.

Each of these challenges is discussed below.

### LANGUAGE BARRIERS

In responding to calls for service, police have a hard time knowing what to do or how to help if language barriers prevent them from understanding what has happened, law enforcement participants said. If police respond to a domestic violence call and cannot communicate with anyone on the scene, for example, they may not be able to make an arrest. Community and police participants alike noted that language barriers also prevent many immigrants from reaching out to the police for protection.

A lack of effective interpretation and translation services can be a significant barrier to communication with immigrants. Effective interpretation and translation requires skill in communicating regional and country differences in how languages are written and spoken. Agencies are encouraged to use interpreters and translators who are qualified or certified by trusted services or organizations such as the U.S. Department of State.



### *Addressing Language Barriers*

To help law enforcement agencies meet the challenge of serving people who do not speak English well, the COPS Office and the Vera Institute of Justice have partnered on two projects. The first, a report that describes the innovative strategies that law enforcement agencies are using to address language barriers, was completed in 2007, and is available at the COPS Office web site: [www.cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=403](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=403). The second, a report that was released in 2009, builds on this work, highlighting promising practices in the field, is available at [www.cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=518](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ResourceDetail.aspx?RID=518).

### **RELUCTANCE TO REPORT CRIME**

Participants reported that when immigrants call law enforcement they may be taking a risk in making their immigration status, or the status of their family members or neighbors, known to authorities. A domestic violence victim who doesn't have legal status, for example, may not call police for fear that she or her abuser will be deported.

Criminals are also known to target immigrants because their reluctance to report crimes is well-known. One community representative described serious crimes, including murder and rape, that victimized immigrants in his area. Some in the Latino community knew who committed the crimes, he said, but they would not come forward out of fear that their immigration status would be questioned.

Similarly, it was noted that some employers take advantage of undocumented immigrants' labor and refuse to pay wages, knowing that the workers won't report them to police or other authorities.

### **FEAR OF POLICE**

Many immigrants—refugees, especially—come from places where police are corrupt and abusive. In Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, many residents in the large Cambodian population fled the Khmer Rouge regime and genocide. People who have experienced civil war, genocide, and martial law may have difficulty trusting that the police are there to help.



### **FEDERAL IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT CAN AFFECT LOCAL TRUST-BUILDING EFFORTS**

Participants shared their view that an immigration enforcement action by federal agents can seriously damage hard-won trust at the local level. Immigrants may not be able to distinguish between city, state, and federal law enforcement officers. Therefore, when a raid happens, they may incorrectly attribute the action to local police—even if local police have worked to build community trust for years. Complicating the matter, some local police are now authorized to enforce federal immigration law under section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, while others are not.

### **LACK OF AWARENESS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Focus group participants reported widespread misunderstanding within new immigrant communities about the role of police and how police expect people to behave in routine encounters. When stopped by a police officer while driving, for example, it is a normal cultural practice for people in El Salvador to get out of the car and approach the officer. In the U.S., this is exactly the wrong thing to do and can lead to law enforcement using force on the person.

Similarly, it is common for Cambodian immigrants to keep their wallet in their socks. Consequently, when asked by a police officer for their driver's license, they might reach to their sock for the wallet, a gesture police officers—especially those not familiar with Cambodian habits—might interpret as reaching for a weapon. If a language barrier further impairs clear communication, the situation could escalate dangerously.

Limited police understanding about cultural differences among people from different countries is a challenge as well, as the previous scenario suggests. To cite another example, without training about cultural differences police might interpret bruising that results from “coining”—a traditional Cambodian treatment for illness—as a sign of physical abuse.

### **INDIVIDUAL OFFICERS CAN DAMAGE A DEPARTMENT'S EFFORTS**

Immigrant community leaders recounted some instances when police officers treated them with disrespect or hostility. One was rebuffed when he offered to shake an officer's hand. Another described being pulled over, asked “why



he came here,” and told to “shut up” before being kept overnight in jail. He was deeply offended: in his culture, “shut up” is one of the worst things a person can say to another. No matter what their training and regardless of their department’s policy, if line officers do not treat immigrants fairly and respectfully, the department’s relationship with immigrant communities will suffer. Even healthy relationships can be badly damaged as word of such incidents spreads.



### **PROMISING PRACTICES WITHIN POLICE DEPARTMENTS**

Members of the focus group identified several promising approaches that law enforcement agencies are using to overcome obstacles to community policing in immigrant communities. Many of these efforts can be undertaken within police departments and sheriffs' offices. They include creating a specialized unit for immigrants, tackling common problems in partnership with other agencies, providing strong leadership, training officers in cultural differences, recruiting a diverse police force, and making a community internship part of cadet training.

#### **CREATE A SPECIALIZED UNIT FOR IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES**

A specialized unit within the police department can make outreach and service to the immigrant community its primary purpose. The Metropolitan Nashville Police Department's El Protector program, for example, has two dedicated officers who engage the Hispanic community in efforts that emphasize crime prevention and education about the role of law enforcement.

The officers appear regularly on local Spanish radio and television programs. They also run specialized initiatives. Recently, for example, they conducted safety inspections for children's car seats, explaining the law and providing car seats to needy families. El Protector also enlists immigrant communities' help to solve crimes. A crime videotaped in a Latino-owned store, for example, can be sent to one of the officers, who forwards it to contacts in the community. The contacts can keep an eye out for the perpetrator, both to protect themselves and to help identify the suspect.

Both officers are fluent in Spanish and English. This enables them to respond to crimes reported by people with limited English proficiency and also share key information with English-speaking officers. The program also has a Citizen's Advisory Committee that enlists prominent members of the Latino community, including politicians and business owners, to guide the program.

Creating a specialized unit is not always possible. But most police departments have at least one community liaison officer. One chief suggested supplementing this limited capacity with a logistical workplace move that can increase



its effectiveness: place the community liaison officer's work space next to the patrol supervisor's. The proximity will have the effect of informing the supervisor of issues relevant to the community, he explained. "The patrol job will be easier if officers [who report to the now better-informed supervisor] know what is going on in the community."

### **ALLY WITH AGENCIES FACING SIMILAR PROBLEMS**

One chief joined with law enforcement agencies from two neighboring cities to create a Joint Community Police Partnership to address common challenges. The goal was to enhance communication and understanding between the cities' police officers and members of the immigrant communities they all serve. Their joint efforts, funded by the county and state agencies, have included holding combined community meetings and translating shared pamphlets and videos to improve local immigrants' understanding of police procedures and laws. Police officers from the three cities gain a better understanding of shared local immigrant communities through trainings led by community members.

### **PROVIDE STRONG LEADERSHIP**

The current atmosphere around federal immigration policy can be confusing for many officers. In some areas, they are permitted to ask about immigration status; in other areas this is discouraged. Officers need clear direction about how they are expected to interact with immigrants. The following are some guidelines:

- **Be consistent, whether speaking to officers or to outside audiences.** Inform all officers about any new immigration policy and provide training on it. Deputies and people in top management need to reinforce the chief's philosophy.
- **Getting a message from the chief to line officers requires the help of middle managers.** The chiefs at the focus group agreed that police sergeants run the day-to-day operations of police departments. They suggested including middle managers in major decisions and asking for their feedback on how to implement changes.





- **Create incentives.** Incentives such as bilingual pay—a stipend for officers who have second language skills—or a “hire back” program that offers overtime pay to officers who can provide needed language services on days they are not scheduled to work can help build available capacity.
- **Hold people accountable.** To encourage positive interaction with immigrant communities, institutionalize desired behaviors and raise their value by recognizing and rewarding these behaviors in performance reviews.

### TRAIN OFFICERS ABOUT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Law enforcement leaders agreed that cultural training, although not a new idea, is an essential basis of good police-immigrant relations. Many focus group participants, however, noted that training can be expensive and that they had participated in ineffective cultural trainings that were not specific to the communities in their jurisdictions or were not tailored to the realities of law enforcement. Regardless of funding restrictions, police participants agreed that training is essential. They offered several ideas to make it attractive and effective:

- **Rebrand it.** A seminar called “Maintaining Tactical Advantage” that teaches officers about ways immigrants may behave in encounters with police may be more appealing than one titled “Cultural Diversity,” even though they cover the same material. One chief suggested connecting cultural training to law enforcement conferences because those are well-attended.
- **Walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.** One agency representative suggested pairing police officers with community members and asking each to “walk a mile in the other’s shoes.” Having each spend time learning what the other person’s life is like may leave a more lasting impression than a lecture.



- **Explore online options.** One smaller agency found that online training was useful and affordable. Meeting state mandates for officer training can impose a financial burden on small agencies and take scarce personnel off the job. One agency solved those problems by contracting with the Law Enforcement Training Network, an online source that offers courses on a wide range of topics, including cultural diversity. Because the courses are not tied to a place and time, officers take them when it is convenient for them.

### **RECRUIT A MORE DIVERSE POLICE FORCE**

Departments can take steps to hire both civilian staff and sworn officers from the immigrant community. One participant said his department invests significant time and money employing young people from diverse backgrounds as civilians and then assists in putting them through college. Afterwards, the department hires them into the force.

### **MAKE A COMMUNITY INTERNSHIP PART OF CADET TRAINING**

One participant described a program that places cadets with community organizations. The community leader from that jurisdiction recalled that when a cadet who interned with him went on to become a police officer, people in the immigrant community felt comfortable calling the station and asking for him.



### **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN POLICE AND IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES**

The work police departments and sheriffs' offices do to build relationships with communities happens on two levels. Some efforts are aimed at the entire local immigrant community, such as using a Spanish-language radio station to broadcast pertinent information. Other efforts focus on identifying and establishing strong connections with specific community leaders. This section describes promising ways to build relationships on both levels, starting with communities as a whole.

#### **CONNECTING WITH ENTIRE COMMUNITIES**

Recommended practices for reaching entire communities fall into five categories: put fears to rest, encourage crime reporting, create safe zones to foster dialog, leverage targeted media, and maximize citizens police academies.

1. **Put fears to rest.** One of the most useful things local law enforcement can do is explain what police do and do not do. For many immigrants, reassurance that they will not be detained or deported removes the fear of reporting crime. In practice, this could mean telling people any of the following that is appropriate in one's jurisdiction:
  - Officers cannot ask about immigration status.
  - Officers do not do employment investigations.
  - The department will protect crime victims and witnesses regardless of their immigration status.
  - Police target only the people who commit crimes.

Whatever the message, police leaders stressed the need to be consistent and persistent in putting the message out.

2. **Encourage people to report crime.** Immigrants need to be encouraged to report crime—and told they can do so anonymously, if necessary. Departments should widely publicize the different ways people can report crime.



3. **Create safe zones to foster dialog, both formal and informal.** The places where police-community interactions happen are important. Police and community leaders agreed that meetings held in precinct offices, for example, will be unsuccessful because few people will attend. Instead, they suggested holding such meetings in neutral settings, such as a local house of worship (and asking clergy leaders to promote the meeting with their congregations).

Schools are also good places to engage immigrant communities because parents already go there often and may be comfortable with school personnel. Schools might also be enlisted to help get a message out from police to families. Another idea is to bring a police officer into schools on career day.

Participants discussed the value of establishing venues for informal contact, as well. One chief suggested, for example, that police officers team up with staff from the local parks department to bring sports equipment to neighborhoods that have few parks or playing fields. Informal contact during, say, a basketball game, can give young people a chance to make a positive connection with a police officer.

When time and resources permit, officers should also be encouraged to get out of their car, walk neighborhood streets, and talk casually with residents and business owners. They might also attend a local soccer game or street fair to get to know people.

One immigrant business leader invited a police representative to talk to his employees and their families—more than 100 people—while they ate dinner together at a restaurant. In this informal setting, he said, employees got the message that the police were there to help. When a police officer stood up, spoke a few words in Spanish, and announced she was from El Salvador, everyone cheered. “She made people feel part of the police department and part of the policing effort,” he said.



4. **Leverage targeted media.** A sheriff or police chief with an important message may want to appear on a local cable television program, a Spanish-language radio station, or alongside local clergy during religious services. Inexpensive public service announcements are also an option. Officers who speak community members' language can make weekly appearances on radio shows that give listeners a chance to call in with questions. Such outreach need not be electronic to be successful: flyers posted at a popular store or major house of worship can work well, too.
5. **Maximize citizens police academies.** Many jurisdictions have existing citizens police academies for educating community members about policing. Simply knowing what to do in routine encounters, such as a traffic stop, can make interactions go more smoothly. Immigrant community leaders and members should be encouraged to attend. One focus group participant and community representative recalled that after attending a citizens police academy meeting he realized, "We're not dealing with the same kind of police as we were back home." It was also noted that citizens police academies can be customized: a New Americans' Academy for immigrants and refugees, a Teen Academy, a Hispanic Citizens Police Academy, etc.

### WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY LEADERS

Police leaders agreed that reaching out to and maintaining regular dialog with immigrant community leaders is essential. But many immigrant communities are very diverse. An immigrant community that appears from the outside to be one group may in fact be divided along regional, religious, ethnic, or clan lines. Communities with many factions make deciding who to partner with a challenge. In such cases, participants said, meeting individually with all significant players may be the best approach. Three promising practices emerged: reach out to religious and business leaders, identify people who can help in a crisis, and do not rely on just one person.



1. **Reach out to religious and business leaders.** Focus group participants agreed that religious leaders and business owners from immigrant communities both tend to know many people and have influence. Local houses of worship and chambers of commerce are a good place to start. Also, look for chances to include different stakeholders.

The police academy graduation is preceded by a prayer, usually given by a local Catholic priest. Seeing an opportunity to do things differently, the chief invited a Latino pastor to open the ceremony. “These small gestures can pay big dividends,” he said. The closing prayer can be offered by a leader of another faith.

2. **Identify people who can help in a crisis.** Participants discussed how to handle relationships with immigrant communities after a critical incident, such as a police shooting. At these times, participants said, it is crucial to get clear, accurate information to community members. Police and community participants alike agreed that without this kind of effort, rumor and misinformation can spread quickly. One community leader suggested that police create an organizational chart that identifies community leaders (along with their strengths and resources) who the police can go to for help in stopping the rumors. He also suggested that police cultivate these contacts with regular meetings.
3. **Do not rely on just one person.** Participants agreed that having one go-to person in an immigrant community is not enough. “The one person who will calm the waters doesn’t exist,” one police leader explained. “In a very diverse community, it’s a moving target.” Another shared this lesson: “We had only one contact person, and when that person relocated, the whole system failed.”

### ENGAGING THE LARGER NONIMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

Immigrant communities are situated within and around larger nonimmigrant communities. In addition to engaging the immigrant community, it is also important to engage the nonimmigrant communities in one’s jurisdiction



to address concerns and issues relating to crime and disorder. Participants suggested three ways to engage the nonimmigrant public in the conversation: be an educator, build understanding between communities, and look for common ground.

1. **Be an educator.** One chief said he uses his bully pulpit to educate the public and local politicians. Putting out statistics about the low frequency of immigrants' involvement with crime, for example, helps the general public see that immigrants as a group are not more likely to be criminals.
2. **Build understanding between communities.** One police chief stressed the need to include the nonimmigrant community in all outreach efforts. Residents in communities that have recently become home to many new immigrants may not know much about their immigrant neighbors, and vice versa. One suggestion for building understanding between the two groups was for police to create regular forums for dialog about what it means to have a safe community. Having a local nonprofit facilitate such a meeting allows the police to remain neutral. By asking questions like "What is a safe community?" and "What hinders community building?" facilitators may be able to draw out people's concerns, allowing people from different communities to see how their behaviors affect one another. In practice, this could mean members of a new immigrant group learn that their loud parties bother their neighbors. Meanwhile, the nonimmigrants may learn that loud parties are a normal part of life in the immigrants' home country and that being asked to quiet down is a new expectation.
3. **Look for common ground.** Participants suggested that people may need to be reminded that public safety is a shared concern. Police chiefs should talk to the public about the need to protect all victims of crime, whoever they are. It was also noted that criminals who prey on immigrants will prey on others as well. It therefore benefits everyone when members of immigrant communities trust police enough to report crime.



## DEALING WITH FEDERAL IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS

Police participants noted that local law enforcement departments are expected to cooperate with federal agencies when they enter their jurisdiction, providing transportation and other logistical support. They also noted, however, that a raid by federal immigration officers can badly damage any trust local police have built with new immigrant communities. Focus group participants offered two main suggestions for handling these tricky situations:

1. **Get as much information as possible.** As soon as a federal immigration enforcement action is imminent, a chief should find out who it is targeting and what is the goal. In some cases, this can help the federal agents be clearer about their own intentions. In one participating jurisdiction, for example, a recent sweep was supposed to target only serious criminals. Yet, it also netted a law-abiding woman who did important antigang work in the community. Early discussions with federal agents may help avoid similar unintended outcomes.
2. **Educate immigration officers about cultural issues.** Federal immigration enforcement officers may not be as familiar with an immigrant community's cultural norms as local law enforcement officers are. If possible, local police should try to brief federal agents about culturally specific issues prior to their enforcement action. It was noted, for example, that people who have fled civil war or genocide can easily be retraumatized. Sufficiently informed, agents may be able to alter their procedures to prevent this.





### MOVING FORWARD

The focus group participants agreed that efforts to build relationships between law enforcement and new immigrant communities are vital. As the meeting concluded, they discussed the importance of institutionalizing promising practices and including more police departments and communities in their conversation. Three key needs were identified:

1. **Funding to support local agencies' efforts to implement promising practices.** "If we want to level out the quality of security we provide to relatively homogenous neighborhoods and the security we provide in immigrant neighborhoods," one chief noted, "it requires some investment."
2. **Continued discussion among and between police and communities.** Communities are changing rapidly. Some in law enforcement feel blindsided by the challenges encountered in policing a diverse population. At times, they may also feel caught between the community and federal immigration officials. More discussion about these issues and best practices needs to happen among law enforcement across the country.

The focus group participants described the experience of discussing problems and solutions with peers from other jurisdictions as a powerful and reinforcing experience. As one community leader commented, "I thought my police department was the only one that cared about this." Police departments across the U.S. are struggling with similar issues. It makes sense to create ways for them to share what they have learned.

3. **Dissemination of best practices.** Effective strategies for policing new immigrant communities need to be shared among and within law enforcement agencies. Participants suggested these possible dissemination strategies:



- Take advantage of a well-attended police event, such as a Police Executive Research Forum meeting or International Association of Chiefs of Police meeting, to organize a forum on police-immigrant relations. Large, well-attended meetings bring in diverse viewpoints and keep travel costs down.
- Create a web site that shares best practices and encourages others to add their own lessons and ideas.
- Make best practices available on portable media, such as CD-ROMs or DVDs.

By convening this focus group and publishing this report, the COPS Office seeks to support law enforcement agencies as they strive to serve immigrant communities. The COPS Office has partnered with the Vera Institute of Justice on two projects related to overcoming language barriers, one of several challenges discussed here. The COPS Office will continue to look for ways to implement the recommendations in this report and to identify other ways to advance community policing efforts in immigrant communities.



The common challenges that law enforcement agencies face when working with immigrant communities include language barriers, fear of police, and cultural differences, among others. To address these challenges and discuss promising practices for cultivating, maintaining, and restoring partnerships to keep communities safe, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, in partnership with the Vera Institute of Justice, sponsored a focus group comprising leading law enforcement leaders, experts, and community leaders from five jurisdictions in the United States. This report is based on that discussion.



#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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To obtain details on COPS programs, call the  
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June 2009

e060924209

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