

Testimony of Bill Geller to
The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing,
Listening Session on Community Policing and Crime Reduction

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After 40 years of working with police, community organizations, government agencies, civil rights advocates and researchers on a variety of police-community challenges, I have reached a few conclusions that I hope will help you strengthen policing in our free society. My conclusions highlight some less obvious capabilities that police have or could develop and which they can use to powerfully bolster community-improvement efforts. I recommend that this Task Force identify effective ways to motivate police to use such capabilities to help communities help themselves. Here are some of my conclusions:

1. It is feasible to police communities in a way that helps reduce crime, disorder and fear and honors cherished liberties.
2. Police can *catalyze* community action that will build safer, fairer, more livable neighborhoods.
3. Such “catalytic policing” involves supporting community members and organizations who are already working hard to improve the livability, safety and fairness of the neighborhood.
4. Arresting criminals is one way to arrest community decline, but police have other problem-solving options. For example, they can help community groups overcome program implementation obstacles; vouch for the community groups with government agencies, potential funders, opinion leaders and others who can make or break the groups’ success; and invest tangible resources to enhance the community groups’ impact on neighborhood well-being.
5. Some of the capabilities police can deploy are their intimate knowledge of community assets and liabilities; their credibility among government decision-makers; their “can-do” attitude and creativity in working around bureaucratic obstacles; and their ability to nonviolently influence people to behave in ways that bolster community well-being.

6. Catalyzing community-led progress often puts police in *supportive* roles in which the traditional police “command presence” is unhelpful. Cops’ brains and hearts may be more useful than their guns and badges. Police and community groups may need to invent ways to teach and learn from each other about how to get things done to improve communities. They need a generosity of spirit that includes using mistakes and setbacks as building blocks to success rather than excuses to walk away from the collaboration.

What might come off as heavy-handed tactics by police when they operate *independently* can be seen instead as nurturing, empathetic, trust-building investments in helping communities improve themselves if police act as *community-endorsed* collaborators. And when collaborative initiatives help squelch long-standing neighborhood crime problems, police often feel new trust in community organizations and new job satisfaction.

Let me illustrate my conclusions with a particular type of police-community collaboration. For the past 20 years, my colleague Lisa Belsky and I have conducted field studies of the transformative community impact of partnerships between police and local community developers. We have worked with police-community developer partnerships in many cities and have written two books (including 8 case studies) about a strategy we’ve called “building our way out of crime.” In this strategy, community-endorsed physical redevelopment of blighted, disinvested neighborhoods improves quality of life and cuts crime—without significant gentrification.

The 8 collaborations we documented are exemplars of how *government can catalyze capable community organizations by behaving in a respectful, strategic manner that puts government in service to community-led initiatives*. These 8 collaborations produced crime drops ranging from 70% to above 90%—declines that lasted for years. Community improvements included replacing or repurposing crime-generating properties with better housing, commerce,

social services and amenities. Properties that once ruined neighborhoods were transformed into generators of safety, vitality and community pride. Our case studies were in Charlotte, Minneapolis, Portland (Oregon), Providence, Richmond (Virginia), Sacramento, San Diego, and Washington, DC.

In these cities, participants told us the transformations would not have occurred but for the police-community developer partnerships. And participants did not attribute crime drops to displacement of crime and poor people to other neighborhoods.

My final observation is about building police-community trust. I think durable trust comes *not* when cops and community members who distrust each other *sit and talk* about distrust but when they *take action* together that solves daunting crime problems. Trust is a valuable *by-product* of collective pride in a job well done by people who were brave and dedicated enough to suspend their skepticism and work across the police-community divide to accomplish something important that neither could have done acting alone.