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Step by Step: Bridging the Gap between Law Enforcement and Youth

Juan Castro

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Juan Castro

Partners for Peace, German Lopez, Vicky Law

Collaborative Health & Human Services

Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Author Note

Juan Castro, Department of Collaborative Health and Human Service, California State University Monterey Bay.

This capstone project was created with the support of Partners for Peace, Gil Basketball Academy, and the Salinas Police Department to enhance the relationship between youth and law enforcement officers through a community basketball event.

Correspondence concerning addressing this article should be sent to Juan Castro, California State University, Monterey Bay, 100 Campus Center, Seaside, CA.
Title

Step by Step: Bridging the Gap between Law Enforcement and Youth

Abstract

Tensions between law enforcement and the community have hindered the ability to build a positive relationship. Through Partners for Peace, Step-Up Mentoring program youth participants will gather for a community event to help mend the relationship with law enforcement officers. The purpose of the project is to generate a positive activity in which law enforcement can be viewed in a non-authoritative context. The community event was implemented through a friendly basketball game that was meant to facilitate a positive interaction and a discussion to provide a platform where the youth and law enforcement can gain each other’s perspective. The outcome of the event created a slightly stronger relationship between the youth and law enforcement officers. A recommendation for Partners for Peace would be to continue implementing the event annually in order to build stronger ties between the youth and law enforcement officers.

Keywords: Law Enforcement, Youth, Community Policing, Community Event
Agency and Community Served

Partners for Peace organization is a local non-profit organization that was founded in 1995. The organization focuses on a variety of issues affecting the youth in Salinas by implementing programs that deter gang association, increase literacy, and create opportunities for youth to explore interests. Partners for Peace also offers programs that help improve family dynamics and resolve conflicts. Programs offered by Partners for Peace include: The Parent Project, Step-Up Mentoring, and Strengthening Families (Partners for Peace, 2018). The main focus of the organization is to build stronger families and help at-risk youth for a more peaceful community. To achieve its goals, the organization partners with other local organizations such as the Community Alliance for Safety and Peace, Salinas Union High School District, Salinas Probation Department, and other organizations that provide support for a safer Salinas. Partners for Peace has a Board of Directors that consists of 12 dedicated professionals ranging from judges to doctors, who are all invested in the community.

The project was implemented through the agency’s Step-Up Mentoring program, which serves at-risk youth ages 11-14. Partners for Peace strives to build a strong foundation for youth to succeed in the Salinas area. The Step-Up Mentoring program aims to build the character and knowledge of at-risk youth by utilizing informational presentations on the common problems youth may face in the Salinas community. The goal of the program is to reduce and prevent gang association, truancy, criminal offenses, and also introduce the youth to new life experiences which will benefit their outlook on life and others (Partners for Peace, 2018). The agency serves any families, youth, or parents in need in the Salinas area.
Problem Definition

Tensions between youth and law enforcement officers have intensified, resulting in a hostility towards officers. At-risk youth who are exposed to the negatives of law enforcement encounters maintain hostile views on law enforcement in general. Negative law enforcement encounters include unnecessary stop and frisks, racial profiling, and unnecessary use of force. Unfortunately the at-risk youth in the program have had experiences that elicit delinquent behavior, which is behavior that lacks a sense of moral duty and leads to crime or punishment. Whether it be their environment, the lack of support, or lack of guidance, the problem persists. The Step-Up Mentoring program promotes a shift in attitude on life towards a more positive outlook. The youth who are involved in the program are considered delinquent, some youth are obligated to be in the program to fulfill probation requirements while some are encouraged by parents or guardians. While the program encourages a positive change in the youth’s life, there can be resentment for authority, especially law enforcement. Various studies show there is a link between delinquent youth and negative attitudes towards law enforcement. Typically, it is the minority youth who have negative views on law enforcement officers. This is due to an experience of negative encounters with law enforcement that the youth may have encountered or heard about, consequently shaping their views on law enforcement officers (Brown & Benedict, 2005). Due to the negative context of interactions with law enforcement, at-risk youth can grow to detest law enforcement officers despite a cease or absence in delinquency. Generating a positive interaction with police officers will benefit at-risk youth to have respect for authority.

Contributing Factors

At-risk youth who are delinquent are bound to run into problems with the law at some point. A factor that increases propensity for delinquency and ultimately contact with law
enforcement is peer association. Youth who are delinquent will gravitate towards similar youth or exacerbate their delinquency through the peers they associate with. There are three reasons why youth who associate with delinquents are at a higher risk for police contact. One reason is that police identify groups of delinquent youth as gangs. With efforts to reduce crime caused by gangs, officers will initiate contact with these groups with suspicion of delinquency. Second, the presence of police may fuel a delinquent’s motivation to act in a disrespectful manner due to the expectation of their peers to defy authority. Lastly, police will form prejudice based on the notion that young groups of youth are typically up to no good (Fitzgerald & Carrington, 2011). Groups of delinquents who are contacted by law enforcement throughout their youth will continue to despise authority and fail to respect laws or law enforcement.

A separate factor that influences negative attitude towards police in youth is the type of experience that they have had in the past. If youth have only experienced negatives outcomes when they deal with law enforcement officers, they will begin to form pessimistic views on law enforcement. For example, youth who have been through the juvenile justice system have shaped their view on law enforcement officers as negative. The hostile views are set by the constant targeting of certain groups that law enforcement associates with crime. If a group of young men are gathered around with certain clothing or in a certain area, law enforcement will be wary of the group. This causes a sense of insecurity in the group and law enforcement presence is generally associated with a crime when in reality there may not be anything going on. Regardless, the mere presence of law enforcement implicates a sense of targeting towards the youth and it leads to the mistrust of officers.

The cause of the mistrust is what makes programs that facilitate a positive interaction between law enforcement officers and youth so important. Programs that enable clear
communication between the two groups eliminates the practice of punishment of delinquent youth. Working with law enforcement officers to raise awareness about positive growth programs for the youth will give the youth an opportunity to learn instead of simply being arrested (Pollack, 2017). The alternative to arrest will show the delinquent youth that law enforcement officers genuinely care about the problems they face, and they are not just there to punish.

Culture and environment are also factors that influence delinquency among youth. There is a compelling find that Latino youth have a predisposition to violence due to the hypermasculine Latino culture that encourages violence as a response to conflict (Peacock, McClure, & Agars, 2003). Additionally, there is a link between exposure to violence and increase in high risk behavior among youth. The type of neighborhood that a youth lives in may dictate their problem solving and conflict resolution skills, where the result is typically violence (Peacock, et al., 2003). In general, these behaviors are indicative of the delinquency that generates negative law enforcement encounters. The negative attitude towards law enforcement officers stems from their actions, which is to detain and arrest criminals. Delinquent youth will automatically despise the authority the officers hold and their consequences will develop into a disdain for officers doing their job.

Consequences

The ramifications of a severed relationship between at-risk youth and law enforcement are increased tensions where youth fail to respect law enforcement officers, resulting in delinquency. In communities with high rates of violence amidst the presence of law enforcement officers, youth who are exposed will eventually mirror their experiences. The high exposure to violence means that the youth are more prone to delinquency and in turn are more likely to being
arrested or contacted by law enforcement (Peacock, et. al., 2003). The cycle that can arise from tarnished relationships between youth and law enforcement can leave the youth vulnerable to a continuance of delinquency and potentially creating habitual offenders. The lack of respect for law enforcement officers means that there is a lack of respect for the law. Youth that are on the path to becoming adult offenders must be apprehended and rehabilitated. It begins with having respect for the law and law enforcement officers, which is why the role of law enforcement officers is pivotal in decreasing delinquency and promoting positive change.

Youth delinquency can range from violent crimes to petty crimes. Although serious crimes such as murder deserve punishment despite the age, there is a line where incarceration is detrimental for youth. Youth are being arrested for crimes that should be treated as problems with a need for rehabilitation. In 2016, the United States arrested youth for drug abuse at a rate of 295 per 100,000 ranging from ages ten through seventeen (U.S Department of Justice, 2016). Youth were also arrested for simple assault at a rate of 382 per 100,000 in 2016 (U.S Department of Justice, 2016). These offenses may be punishable by law, but law enforcement officers should realize the harm of sending a juvenile to jail instead of using discretion and finding alternative options for rehabilitation. The event of being arrested for minor crimes can propel a self-imposed belief in youth that they are indeed bad persons.

**Problem Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributing Factors</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer association</td>
<td>Increased tensions among law enforcement and youth</td>
<td>Failure to respect police authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative past encounters with officers</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Youth delinquency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Project Description and Justification

Project Title
Step by Step: Bridging the Gap between Law Enforcement and Youth

Description

The project implemented was a community basketball game between youth and law enforcement officers. The objective was to build trust between the two parties through positive interaction and engagement at the event. To realize the project, was promotion of the event to the youth and families of the youth who are currently participating in the Step-Up Mentoring program through the Partners for Peace organization. The youth were prompted to engage in the event while maintaining an open mind. Meetings were held with the youth one week prior to the event in order to facilitate discussion topics and to address questions or concerns pertaining to the event. The content of the event focused on building trust in law enforcement among the youth and parents in attendance.

Purpose

The purpose of the project was to encourage the at-risk youth in the Step-Up Mentoring program to change how they perceive law enforcement officers for the better. Many of the youth in the program have experienced negative contacts with law enforcement in the past, which has shifted their views on law enforcement towards a more hostile perspective. Additionally, there is a common misconception in the United States that law enforcement officers are trained to kill as means of defense. This can cause public distrust and apprehensiveness of officers, which can translate to nervous actions or hostile attitude during an encounter. The project addressed these issues and helped change the perception of officers for the at-risk youth.
Justification

The event was beneficial for the at-risk youth who showed signs of delinquency. The opportunity to have a face to face interaction with law enforcement officers in a casual environment was beneficial for the youth and law enforcement officers. It gave the opportunity for the youth and law enforcement officers to learn more about each other, whereas without the event there was minimal opportunity to build a connection between the two groups. The opportunity for the youth to interact with officers in a non-authoritative context generated a deeper trust among the youth. Similar events in the past have shown how positive interaction has accomplished a stronger connection between youth and law enforcement officers.

Youth leadership camps in La Mesa, California have proved to be an effective model for law enforcement officers to engage with youth in a positive context. The program offers a great opportunity for youth that build upon critical principles in a youth’s life, including, “…leadership training, life skills, personal development, team building, and responsibility. Participants engage in classroom instruction and discussions, athletic and academic team challenges, public service opportunities, and interaction with community leaders and motivational speakers” (Willis, 2013, pp. 3). The camps help youth learn skills and have experiences that they would not have had the opportunity for elsewhere. Without a genuine relationship, at-risk youth and law enforcement will not be able to show empathy for one another. The inefficiency to communicate will lead to a tarnished relationship, in turn resulting in higher delinquency and a law enforcement objective to arrest instead of rehabilitate youth.

Project Implementation

The project was successfully implemented due to a great amount of organization and coordination. The activities that were completed for the project were completed in a timely
manner and the basketball game was organized extremely efficiently given the time restriction.

The project was fulfilled by following the timeline below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Completion Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact law enforcement agencies to ask for participation in event</td>
<td>June 1 – Aug. 1</td>
<td>Aug. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact community partners to ask for donations/funding</td>
<td>June 1 – Aug. 1</td>
<td>Aug. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop survey for youth</td>
<td>Aug. 1 – Sept. 1</td>
<td>Sept. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribute permission slips to parents of youth</td>
<td>Sept. 19 - 26</td>
<td>Sept. 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer surveys to youth</td>
<td>Sept. 26 – Oct. 31</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect survey data</td>
<td>Sept. 26 – Oct. 31</td>
<td>Oct. 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball game between youth/officers and discussion panel</td>
<td>Oct. 22</td>
<td>Oct. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze and evaluate data on the surveys about how youth attitudes towards law enforcement has changed</td>
<td>Oct. 24 – Dec. 14</td>
<td>Dec. 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main deliverables for the project were: surveys, basketball equipment, tables and chairs, microphones, and the youth questions for participating law enforcement officers.

**Project Results**

The project expected outcome was to change the youth’s perception on law enforcement. Many of the youth in the Step-Up Mentoring program displayed a lack of respect for authority, and the project aimed to change the trend. Additionally, the project aimed to improve the relationship between the community and law enforcement. The project made a potential lasting impact on the community in regards to how the youth view law enforcement.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the project, data was collected by conducting pre and post event surveys. The objective of the surveys was to assess if youth attitudes towards law
enforcement changed. The Likert scale was utilized on various questions to measure the attitude of the youth regarding law enforcement officers. Both the pre and post event surveys were collected and the data was evaluated through Microsoft Excel. The results indicating if there was a change in attitude in the youth perception of law enforcement were recorded and analyzed.

The project yielded a variety of mixed results in relation to the expected outcome. The results of the surveys are based on a random sample from the youth who participated in the study. The pre and post event surveys answered by the youth in the Step-Up Mentoring program were indicative of overall attitude change towards law enforcement officers. The sample size of the study was 10. Questions specifically asked which yielded comparable data were related to the following topics: respect for law enforcement officers, intimidation by law enforcement officers, whether officers have a positive influence on the community, and if law enforcement officers are necessary for the community. After analyzing the surveys, the questions showed there were mixed results. In Figure 1, statistics compiled from the survey shows that there was a drop in the amount of surveyors who remained neutral on the subject and a rise in those who agreed that they respect law enforcement officers.
Figure 1. Pre and post event surveys display a change in respondents’ respect of law enforcement officers, by J. Castro, 2018.

Figure 2 displays a change in the way the youth viewed law enforcement officers in regards to their importance in the community. Agreement that law enforcement officers are necessary for the community went up by 20% while strong disagreement went to 0%.

Figure 2. Pre and post surveys display the level of agreement in regards to whether law enforcement officers are necessary for the community, by J. Castro, 2018.
The overall outcome of the project shows a slight change in the attitude and hostility that the youth carried towards law enforcement officers. The change indicates that the expected outcome was achieved by the project, although the change was minimal. The project was effective because of the personal interaction that the youth had with law enforcement officers in a non-authoritative context. The law enforcement officers who participated in the event were dressed in basketball shorts and wore t-shirts, which made the interaction more comfortable for the youth involved. It allowed the officers in attendance to be perceived as regular citizens instead of an authority, which humanized their character outside of their job. All these factors played a part in why the project succeeded in making a positive change regarding the hostility between youth and law enforcement.

On the contrary, there are some aspects of the project which did not achieve the expected outcome. One of the survey questions measured the youth’s attitude on the intimidation that law enforcement officers have on them. Figure 3 shows how the pre and post survey answers changed dramatically in regards to the youth’s intimidation of the officers. The shift indicates that once the youth were face to face with the law enforcement officers, their answers changed in the post event survey. This could be caused by the fact that the event of the project was a game of basketball between the youth and law enforcement officers which unfortunately did start to get competitive late in the game. The size advantage and competitive nature of the officers may have been a factor in the rise of neutrality regarding the youth’s intimidation of law enforcement officers.
One of the strengths of the project was the participation of the event, which featured local law enforcement agencies such as the Salinas Police Department and the Monterey County Probation Department. The organization of the event was very successful, thanks to the help of Jose Gil and Susie Gonzalez. The turnout of the event was also a very strong point, with approximately 100 persons in attendance, including the mayor of Salinas, Joe Gunter. The project was also very well received by the community partners, which made it easier to develop and accomplish. The Salinas Police Department has made extensive efforts to integrate community policing, and the event furthered the objective of both the department and the project. It was received very well by participants, so well that the Step-Up Mentoring program, Gil Basketball Academy, and the Salinas Police Department have entertained the idea of making it an annual event.

The project was challenging because of the broad scope of objectives that it could have addressed. Many more objectives could have been completed, though it was difficult with the allotted time for the event in itself, which lasted for approximately two hours. Additionally, it was very difficult to gather a group of law enforcement officers who were available on the night of the event. It was uncertain how many officers exactly were going to attend the event.
Fortunately, the officers were able to attend and there were enough to have a very successful event in terms of participation. The event also included a portion for discussion regarding the difficulties and controversies regarding law enforcement work. The time limit on the event made it difficult to address a wide variety of questions. Also, because there were a lot of participants not everyone was able to ask their question during the discussion. After the event, questions that the youth had were answered by Step-Up Mentoring staff during a reflection of the event.

**Conclusion**

In order to convince Partners for Peace to continue the project, I feel like more quantifying data would be needed in order to fully convince the agency that it would be worth the funds and time. Otherwise, the participants in the event seemed to be satisfied given that it was a new event that had not been done before through the program or the agency. The new experience seemed to excite the youth and the opportunity to voice their opinion is something that can be very valuable to them. For these reasons, it would be in the agency’s best interests to continue to participate in the project as an annual event in association with the Salinas Police Department, the Monterey County Probation Department, and the Gil Basketball Academy. The continuance of the project would greatly benefit the ongoing reparations between the community and law enforcement officers, especially the youth who are in the program. It has the potential to blossom into a great annual event with great benefits for all participants and for the community.

**Personal Reflection**

After completing the project, there was a deeper realization about how damaged the relationship between at-risk youth and law enforcement officers really is. There is a clear indication that the youth in the Step-Up Mentoring Program have a rather fixed perspective on
law enforcement officers. Despite the positivity of the project, there was only a slight change in the attitude of the youth on law enforcement. The upside is that the continued implementation of the event will yield better results the longer it continues to be held. The planning and implementation were stagnant at times, given that nothing similar had been attempted with law enforcement officers in the past and it caused uncertainty about what the results would be. Overall, the agency gained a new event that it can utilize in order to mend the relationship between the at-risk youth and law enforcement officers in order to make the community a safer place.

In retrospect, the project addressed the need to rebuild the relationship that law enforcement officers have with their community. In the interest of public safety, a healthy relationship with the community will be mandatory. The project succeeded in taking the first steps in building a stronger community by addressing the relationship between the at-risk youth and law enforcement officers. To further the effectiveness of the project, a greater presence of law enforcement in the event and Step-Up Mentoring youth will be necessary. It will bridge the communication gap that is evident amongst the two groups. For future capstone students in the agency, it would be best to generate a deeper discussion portion of the event in order to give the youth a voice in their community. It will also give the law enforcement officers the opportunity to listen to what the youth want from them so that the community will be safer.
References


Appendix A

Perception of Law Enforcement Survey

1) Law enforcement officers are necessary for the community

Circle one:

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

2) I respect the police

Circle one:

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

3) I feel safer when I see law enforcement officers around my neighborhood

Circle one:

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

4) I am intimidated by law enforcement officers

Circle one:

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

5) Law enforcement officers make an effort to have a stronger positive influence on the community

Circle one:

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

6) Our community would be a better place without law enforcement officers

Circle one:

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
7) Law enforcement officers do not care about the community

Circle one:

Strongly Agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

8) The law enforcement officers abuse their power

Circle one:

Strongly Agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

9) Law enforcement officers shoot people for no reason

Circle one:

Strongly Agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

10) I have had contact with law enforcement officer(s) in the past

   a. True

   b. False

11) There is a constant law enforcement presence in my neighborhood

   a. True

   b. False