

Improving Interactions between Law Enforcement and Youth: A Community Dialogue Hosted by the American Leadership Forum, Houston and CASE for Kids (Center for Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning)

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“The information conveyed in this report reflects the general discussion of the community luncheon. The views expressed are not attributable to any particular panelist or organization present at the meeting.”

Studies show that inner city youth, specifically at-risk teens, and police officers often hold negative stereotypes of each other. These stereotypes have created myths that drive a wedge between law enforcement and youth. As a result, police and youth encounters are both confrontational and dangerous. This is the case for youth in Houston, Texas. From 2012 to 2013, Harris County violent crime arrests of juvenile offenders increased by more than 80%¹. On April 15, 2015, Harris County Precinct One’s Constable Alan Rosen gathered hundreds of Houston youth together for a summit to share painful truths, intractable challenges, and un-acknowledged realities of youth/police relations. Findings from this summit revealed that Houston youth exhibit the least trust of law enforcement as a whole. The majority (47%) of youth surveyed does not trust law enforcement in their communities. Another large percentage of surveyed youth (32%) said that they were ambivalent about law enforcement in their communities. These shocking statistics prompted a community conversation around the changes needed to improve law enforcement and youth interactions.

On May 14, 2015 the Houston American Leadership Forum’s Criminal Justice Class 5 and Harris County Department of Education’s Case for Kids (Center for Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning) hosted a critical follow-up conversation. Key leaders from law enforcement, education, local government and faith and community-based organizations convened for lunch and participated in an

¹ Harris County Juvenile Probation Department. (2013). Annual Report [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/10/> (violent offenses include: murder, rape/sexual assault, and robber)

engaging and thoughtful dialogue focused on solutions. Leaders were strategically seated during lunch with a scribe and a table facilitator. After a brief overview and instructions, more than 50 people who attended this conversation challenged each other to answer three specific questions: 1) What are we doing now, that works; 2) What are we doing now, that is not working; and, 3) What is something new, that we could do; to foster positive relationships between youth and law enforcement. At the end of the lunch, the responses were gathered and discussed with the group.

The results of the discussion revealed that, although the Houston community is beginning the process to foster positive interaction between law enforcement and our youth, there is a lot of room to grow. The responses to the first question, “What are we doing now, that works”, illustrated that Houston is doing well in two areas: 1) Implementing family and youth engagement strategies; and, 2) Community collaboration. The first area is around the types of family and youth engagement strategies that are being implemented through law enforcement agencies, schools, and the community. A few of those strategies included: 1) Law enforcement officer participation in activities with youth such as, basketball leagues, mentoring, and youth summits; 2) K-12 school districts embedding law enforcement officers onto their campuses to build positive relationships; 3) Officers receiving state mandated training on youth interactions; and, 4) Agencies that offer parent and law enforcement engagement education programs. The second area that Houston, Texas is doing well in is community engagement and collaboration. The general consensus of the group was that they were pleased with having opportunities to converse on the topic. The discussion notes indicated that the “community policing” concept and teen summit were deemed favorable.

The second topic of the community dialogue highlighted that there are inadequacies in Houston’s public perception of law enforcement as well as a need to reform the law enforcement and K-12 education system. The responses to the second question, “What are we doing now, that is **not**

working”, illustrated that Houston has room for improvement in three areas: 1) The public has a negative perception of law enforcement; 2) Law enforcement has a lack of understanding of youth which leads to stereotyping and criminalization of minor offenses; and, 3) There inadequate practices and/or policies within the education and law enforcement systems. The first area for improvement that was discussed was the negative perception of law enforcement that is being portrayed by the media. Several notes indicate that, the media often misrepresents situations which lead to law enforcement officers being viewed as oppressors instead of “human”. Law enforcement officers must constantly evaluate how their demeanor and decision-making processes come across in the communities they serve, according to a recent article by the Houston Chronicle.² The second area that the group discussed as not working well in Houston was around stereotyping and profiling of youth. The community responses surrounding this topic were requesting law enforcement to stop labeling youth and using one size all responses.

The final area of improvement, inadequate practices and/or policies within the education and law enforcement systems, dominated a large percentage of discussion notes. The major theme from this discussion was around the decriminalization of laws. Highlights from the discussion notes illustrate that the community wants law enforcement to stop: Criminalization of misdemeanor laws (i.e., truancy); Treating 17 year olds as adults; and, Excessive fines. The notes also indicated that the education system lacked necessary positive youth-police training. “We need to start as early as elementary school to have these conversations”, said Dr. Janice Beal, accomplished author and Chief Executive Officer of Beal Counseling Associates. Other notes indicated that teachers and administrators were afraid of their students.

² Heibutzki, R. The Effects of Being a Police Officer. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved from: <http://work.chron.com/effects-being-police-officer-8866.html>

The dialogue ended with the community's responses to the question "What is something new, that we could do; to foster positive relationships between youth and law enforcement". The community leaders were enthusiastic about discussing the potential of new programs, strategies, and policies to promote the desired relationships. Tom Brooks, Executive Director of Harris County's Juvenile Probation's potential solution to enhance police academy training, "Law enforcement that come out of the academy could be required to mentor one youth for one year to build empathy". The discussion notes revealed an overwhelming need to increase funding for new and existing family and youth engagement programs. The leaders stated that there is a need to support grass roots organizations in low-income areas that have proven results. Additional responses in this arena included: Developing programs that educate youth on how to function in their at-risk environments; Teen courts; and Interactive programs that involved athletes and law enforcement. Another theme within the discussion notes is around reforming law enforcement and the education system. The discussion notes suggested new solutions such as officer and youth sensitivity training, integrating law enforcement interaction skills into high school programs, school resource officers wearing casual attire to decrease authoritative views, and frequent evaluations of an officer's mental state. The final theme from this discussion was around community collaboration. The group suggested: conducting additional research on the topic and integrate it into practice, bringing back "Citizen's Review", as well as promoting collaboration between agencies and systems.

In conclusion, Houston, Texas is well on its way to improve interactions between law enforcement and youth. In September, 2014 the City of Houston accepted the "My Brother's Keeper Challenge" which includes a charge to change the negative view of law enforcement. The community dialogue that took place on May 14th has helped key leaders from law enforcement, education, local government and faith and community-based organizations gain insight into a variety of potential solutions. Francisco Garcia, Program Director of *Texans Together* stated that, "We needed to start by

being honest, once we are honest we can vent, once we vent we can pinpoint the true root of the problem to start the process solving it". The intentions of this dialogue are to take action and drive change to enhance the relationships of law enforcement within the community.