Safety, Justice, and Policing:

Insights from 2017 Forums That Speak to Today

BETWEEN JANUARY AND SEPTEMBER 2017, diverse groups of Americans gathered in nearly 200 face-to-face and online forums to deliberate on community safety, justice, and policing. These deliberative forums often included police officers and community residents who recounted their experiences and concerns and weighed options for change. Locally organized through the network of the National Issues Forums, the forums drew people of all ages, races, and backgrounds.

For nearly four decades, the NIF network has brought people together to deliberate on shared concerns and weigh actions to address them. It is often useful to look back at learning from past forums to see what insights they can offer today.

The 2017 forums revealed profound and widespread concerns over the role of law enforcement. These forums suggest that today's outcry over unjust policing is deep-seated and has been building among Americans of all backgrounds. It is not a passing reaction to recent news, and it is likely to remain potent over time.

In 2017, forum participants repeatedly:

- pointed to "something fundamentally wrong" with the culture, training, and recruitment in many police departments.

- worried that officers often made snap judgments based on race or ethnicity rather than probable cause.

- saw an urgent need to increase understanding and mutual respect between police and people of color.

- recognized the need to tackle growing disrespect for law enforcement, especially among young people.

- called for increased mental health services in their communities.

- supported training all police officers in de-escalation techniques.

The 2017 forums were held after the deaths of Eric Garner in New York, Freddie Gray in Maryland, Trayvon Martin in Florida, and other well-publicized killings. At the time, however, the nation and world had not

yet witnessed the sustained, broad-based protests in cities large and small that we now see in 2020. In many respects, the 2017 forums foreshadowed the consensus-level public concern about abusive policing and police bias that has emerged in recent opinion surveys.[1]

Participants used an issue guide titled *Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?* prepared by the Kettering Foundation. It presents three broad strategies to guide deliberations, along with specific policy actions and trade-offs for each one.

Forums were organized by an array of local organizations and took place in a variety of settings, including:

- public libraries, such as New York's Queens Central Library

- campuses, such as Kansas State University, Lawson State Community College (AL), the University of Washington in Seattle, and Baruch College (NY)

- community organizations, including the LEAD Coalition of Bay County, Florida; Citizens Center for Public Life in Sumter, South Carolina; Talk Salina in Kansas; and a collection of local churches in Jacksonville, Florida

- More than 30 forums were also held online during 2017, using the Common Ground for Action platform.

Information from these forums was gathered and analyzed by researchers from the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. This summary is drawn from their analyses.

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1   https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/10/upshot/black-lives-matter-attitudes.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

Here are five insights that have emerged from the forums:

Insight 1: There was a strong sense among participants in the 2017 forums that something was fundamentally wrong in this country regarding policing as well as a judgment that people needed to show greater respect toward law enforcement. Most defined the problem as both police misconduct and bias and a range of social issues, including lack of mental health services and disrespect for the police.

Insight 2: Many of the 2017 forum participants found the idea of "community policing" compelling, but they seemed to be rethinking what it might mean for their own neighborhoods. For many, this solution is not simply having "more cops on the street." Instead, participants often talked about creating a different, more productive relationship between police and citizens and more action by the community itself. Simply having a more visible police presence in the community was not enough by itself and in some cases was seen as counterproductive.

Insight 3: Most 2017 participants identified racial bias as an important factor undermining police-community relationships. Implicit bias training was mentioned repeatedly as a concrete step that police departments could take. However, many participants also recognized that bias is not limited to police officers and that all kinds of people might benefit from implicit bias training.

Insight 4: Many 2017 forum participants also expressed a strong interest in other issues that seemed to play a role in producing crime, violence, and injustice. People cited poverty and the need for better schools as long-term factors, and the desire to invest in education in

low-income neighborhoods was often mentioned as an action idea. The challenges of mental illness and substance abuse were also cited as more immediate factors that made policing more difficult.

Insight 5: The tone and tenor of these 2017 deliberations seemed dramatically different from clashes often captured on the news or in public meetings. Participants were willing to explore nuances, see positives and negatives of different options, and talk specifically about both changes they would like to see and trade-offs those would entail. Participants in these forums typically saw no single organization or institution as the source of solutions but saw this issue as one on which we hold collective responsibility.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE 2017 SAFETY AND JUSTICE FORUMS

More than 2,000 people participated in the 2017 Safety and Justice forums, which took place in 43 communities, including big cities, suburbs, and small towns, spread over 20 states and the District of Columbia. Most forums lasted approximately two hours. The analysis in this report is based on an array of sources, including post-forum questionnaires, forum transcripts, results from online deliberative forums, moderator reports, and follow-up calls with moderators.

Overall, more than half the people who attended the forums were between the ages of 18 and 30. The attendees were racially diverse, with African Americans and White/Caucasian the most well-represented groups. While forums attract Americans from all walks of life, they generally capture the views of participants who care about the issue and want to talk about it with others. The results of the forums should not be read as random-sampling polling results.

The National Issues Forums guide *Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?* presented three options for deliberation, along with specific policy proposals and trade-offs each might require:

Option 1—Enforce the law together: Our top priority should be finding ways for communities and police to work together to stop violence of all kinds.

Option 2—Apply the law fairly: Only by addressing injustice and bias in law enforcement and the courts can safety for all be achieved.

Option 3—De-escalate and prevent violence: Violence itself is the most urgent threat and should be directly addressed. We should commit to the de-escalation of violence by police and in the larger society.

What follows is a deeper look at the five key insights mentioned earlier that emerged from the 2017 forums.

Insight 1: *There was a strong sense among participants in the 2017 forums that something was fundamentally wrong in this country regarding policing as well as a judgment that people needed to show greater respect toward law enforcement. Most defined the problem as both police misconduct and bias and a range of social issues, including lack of mental health services and disrespect for the police.*

In forums nationwide, participants weighed options and trade-offs, considered different points of view, and told stories about their own personal experiences. Most acknowledged that these issues regarding safety, justice, and policing are nuanced and complex. At the same time, participants repeatedly offered a broad critique of the status quo.

Key Insights

Among the forum participants returning post-forum questionnaires, a large majority agreed that "the number of unarmed people of color who have died in encounters with police shows there is something fundamentally wrong with the culture, training, and recruitment in too many police departments." A similarly large majority agreed that "we need to face up to the fact that too many police officers routinely make snap judgments based on race and ethnicity rather than probable cause." At the same time, most also noted a "need to tackle the growing disrespect for law enforcement, especially among young people, and give the police the support and help they need and deserve."

In the forums, participants repeatedly acknowledged that in most cases the country is very far from achieving the goal they sought: community safety combined with justice.

Many illustrated this statement with their own stories. For example, an Ohio woman related a story about her son being repeatedly profiled by police officers because of his appearance:

> Two of my four kids were African-American, and . . . the police stopped one of our sons three times in the same summer for stealing his own bicycle. After the third traffic stop, he came home and threw his bike across the garage and never got on it again. We visited the chief of police and discussed, did we have to provide pictures for each of the officers so they could remember all four of the young black men who lived in [the community] that they couldn't tell apart? And at the end of that summer, they cracked that bike ring. It was a white mother

and two white sons. Yeah, so I think that now the oxymoron safety and justice is just that for me.

Participants often saw these kinds of incidents, like the one in Ohio and much higher-profile examples, as continuing evidence of how far policing has to go. Some suggested that communities will have to acknowledge and address those experiences to rebuild trust between residents and police. "If we can't get past Trayvon Martin, how are we going to achieve balance?" asked a woman at a forum in New York. "To understand community policing, you have to realize that people aren't going to trust cops automatically right off the bat," said another woman at that forum.

Many participants saw the need for trust—not only between residents and police, but trust among residents—as being fundamental to making progress. An Indiana woman said, "A lot of people will have us believe that we [residents] are disinterested or we're really not active participants, but [we do] want to become involved. But a part of that is trust, and whether or not we trust our police officers, whether or not we trust law enforcement, and trusting each other."

A male participant in the same forum responded, "I think [she] hit it on the head. We have to build that trust first. We have to build it back. We lost it, but we have to build it back."

Some people believed that encouraging respect for police was a key part of rebuilding trust. Participants in a Spanish-speaking forum in Texas were concerned that "people don't respect authority" and "young people don't respect elders" [translations]. "I will be completely honest that the majority of my generation does not even, they say the word 'respect,' but they don't know

what it means," said a Kansas woman. "And not just to police officers, but to people in general."

The idea that citizens have a collective responsibility for building mutual respect and ensuring everyone's safety was a strong undercurrent in many discussions.

Insight 2: *Many of the 2017 forum participants found the idea of "community policing" compelling, but they seemed to be rethinking what it might mean for their own neighborhoods. For many, this approach is not simply having "more cops on the street." Instead, participants often talked about creating a different, more productive relationship between police and residents and more action by the community itself. Simply having a more visible police presence in the community was not enough by itself and in some cases was seen as counterproductive. Those in the forums often saw it as a two-way street—the community more involved in protecting their own neighborhoods and officers more involved in the community.*

Sometimes, participants talked about ways that community members themselves might contribute to the creation of safety and justice. In so doing, they deliberated on the challenges and downsides of various strategies and how they might work. Participants often mentioned community systems such as neighborhood watch groups, block clubs, and new online spaces like NextDoor as ways to facilitate community policing.

"When we instituted community policing, crime went down," a Florida woman attested. But others raised concerns about downsides especially when it comes to racial profiling. A participant in an Indiana forum offered this experience:

I'm originally from Alabama, so my mindset when I think about community policing going back a little bit, it wasn't just the police, it was the next door neighbors in addition to the police, it was the pastor down the street in addition to the police, it was the man who cut the grass down the street who I didn't know, all working together to police the community. And when you even get into issues with young people, it was as likely the police would pull over and say, "James, what are you doing with this group of guys, go home." That could've been my pastor, that could've been the police, that could've been what I would classify as the nosy lady [down] the street, but somebody was going to police me and make sure I was on the right path. Now, when I think of community policing, I think we just look at the law enforcement playing the most active role, when I remember as a kid, I was just as likely to get stopped by any responsible adult if I was doing something out of line as a police officer.

Many participants grappled with how to help police understand and "belong to" the community. Some suggested that if officers are truly a part of the community, they will treat it and its members with more respect. Some talked about programs and policies in their towns to better integrate police into the community, including bringing officers onto civic boards, organizations, and even the "community theatre."

When thinking about how to integrate police into their community, forum participants struggled with

trade-offs and complications such as whether police should be required or at least encouraged to live in the communities where they work. "If you do live in the community, you feel more of a responsibility [for] how you're treating people and the laws that are being enacted and if they're fair or not" said a Kansas woman. Others agreed that if police officers knew people "as neighbors," they would be more effective and trusted. A Washington state moderator reported, "The one item that had consensus was on recruiting police officers within communities instead of sending officers to police communities they were not familiar with."

But others argued that these requirements would be difficult to enforce, especially for the neighborhoods that need police the most. "It would be really hard though to get police officers to live in the communities they serve because then you'd be leaving out the poor communities," said a Kansas woman. Others—including some police officers—commented that having police live in the communities they serve doesn't automatically solve the problems they are facing. "We don't have those [internal] challenges, we really don't, because a lot of our police officers, even though we are diverse, a lot of them are embedded within the city, so they understand our community. A lot of our challenges stems from outside," said an Indiana officer.

Participants in a Spanish-speaking forum in Texas were less concerned about where officers lived and more worried about "breakdowns in family and community connections" [translation] that make policing more difficult no matter where officers live.

Participants also wrestled with the role of neighborhood watch groups. Some saw neighborhood watch as a logical vehicle for citizens to both support police and hold them accountable. "People wanted to explore ways that communities could participate in neighborhood watch programs," reported an Arizona moderator.

Meanwhile, others warned that these groups may not be representative of their communities, may not be held accountable, and could lead to vigilante justice. Some forum participants pointed to the dangers of neighborhood watch groups engaging in racial profiling.

An Indiana woman reported that, "I've heard the block club people say, 'I don't want them people in my house.'" A Kansas moderator said that the head of his neighborhood watch group had called the police when the person saw he was firing rockets as part of a science class. An Ohio woman said, "There's a lot of depth to a community that can't just be understood on paper. I think the people are the best method for that. But I do see the problem of the community trust if you're targeting specific people." And some participants were doubtful about the overall impact neighborhood watch groups could have. An Indiana woman said:

> I don't think there's a lot of ways to communicate with the police unless you're really active. And the people who go to neighborhood watch, the people who go to Coffee with a Cop, those are the people that are generally not out there committing crimes. Those are the people that really probably trust the police if you're going to visit. It's the ones that we're not reaching, the ones that I don't reach through the social service agencies I work with, the ones that are disengaged. How do we reach those people? How do we get them informed?

I think that's a big challenge. I mean . . . we reach the same people all the time. And it's not necessarily the people that we need to be reaching.

Overall, participants appeared to be both optimistic but also realistic about the challenges of police and residents working together to produce more safe and just communities.

Insight 3: *Most 2017 participants identified racial bias as an important factor undermining police-community relationships. Implicit bias training was mentioned repeatedly as a concrete step that police departments could take. However, many participants also recognized that bias is not limited to police officers and that all kinds of people might benefit from implicit bias training.*

Participants often talked about racial bias as a key obstacle to safety and justice in communities. Most recommended tackling it through clear acknowledgment of and training for this problem, including implicit bias training and reduced use of practices that lend themselves to racial profiling.

Others suggested that training was necessary but not sufficient. In many cases, participants called for stronger accountability measures but were less certain about what kinds of strategies might be helpful and workable. The *need* for training seemed to draw more support than specific ideas for making police more accountable. Some participants were pessimistic that accountability was even possible. Actionable steps that were considered included using body cameras and establishing stronger police review boards. "It

brings a level of integrity to the situation that wasn't there before, the body camera does," said a man in a Kansas forum, "and while it might be evidence that's not complete and therefore may mislead sometimes, more often than it does that, it throws a light on the situation."

But interestingly, participants repeatedly placed the onus of fixing the problem of racial bias not just on the police force, but on the law enforcement system more broadly. An Indiana woman noted:

I think a lot of times, if we start to address implicit bias—and I saw here it had implicit bias training down here, that's important for law enforcement. And not just for law enforcement. They always focus on police, but I think judges and prosecutors and defense attorneys— anybody who—probation officers, parole officers—anybody who has any connection with the judicial, criminal justice system really ought to be involved in implicit bias training.

Participants often pointed out that bias is everywhere, and perhaps we could all benefit from implicit bias training. Discrimination and bias were seen as problems that must be dealt with within communities and ourselves.

A Florida man said, "I'm the last person to think that implicit bias training would be helpful. But it helped me." So while the support for addressing biases among police was strong, people saw that the issues were complicated and that all kinds of people—not just police—had a role to play. A Kansas man argued that "The first thing we should all accept about ourselves, about everyone is, every single one of us is biased."

Insight 4: *Many 2017 forum participants also expressed a strong interest in other issues that seemed to play a role in producing crime, violence, and injustice. People cited poverty and the need for better schools as long-term factors, and the desire to invest in education in low-income neighborhoods was often mentioned as an action idea. The challenges of mental illness and substance abuse were also cited as more immediate factors that made policing more difficult.*

Many forum participants identified a range of issues beyond policing that they thought played a role in producing crime, violence, and injustice. In some forums, the conversation moved to questions such as how to eradicate poverty, with police on the periphery of the conversation. A popular and recurring idea was investing in schools, particularly in communities with higher rates of poverty and crime. As one Kansas man put it, "I think interrupting the cycle of poverty would do a great deal toward reducing [the bias] in our communities." A Massachusetts moderator reported that in her forum an idea that came up repeatedly was that "The issues go beyond violence—we must look at and address root societal causes—housing, jobs, poverty, etc." In an Alabama forum, the idea of spending more on schools in poorer minority neighborhoods was viewed as a long-term "investment" in making communities better for all, and this view was widely shared in that forum. Given these comments, it may not be surprising that participants returning post-forum questionnaires did not see greatly increasing the number of police officers as a main way to create safe communities, especially compared to the other proposals and actions discussed.

In addition to focusing on long-term factors that may play into safety and justice, participants in the 2017 forums often spoke about short-term factors and challenges police face, such as mental health and substance abuse issues. "I think mental health is a huge issue that contributes to crime," said an online forum participant. "In a city near me, most of the homeless people were released from a mental health facility that closed down. Sometimes they commit crimes just to go to jail and have a warm place, a bed, and food." Providing more mental health services in communities and more de-escalation training for police officers were broadly supported in both the forum deliberations and the post-forum questionnaires. An Indiana forum participant had this to say as she was considering the option to provide more mental health and substance abuse training for police officers:

> The police, they are almost expected sometimes to be the case worker, the facilitator, just a number of things, because our society has changed. . . . There should be some training that's going on that would at least help identify a person may be schizophrenic . . . or if the police are called back to this house over and over and over again for domestic violence, something's going on. So, there should be some other types of ways we can provide assistance to those parents, beside the police having to do it.

Participants in the 2017 forum were quick to see connections between issues such as mental health and substance abuse and safety and justice. In many cases, participants wondered whether a police officer was the

most appropriate person to respond to certain events. Along these lines, a woman in an Ohio forum said, "I feel like some policing issues call for—I want to say a professional . . . ideally someone who's been trained to deal appropriately with victims, a sensibility, a sensitivity, also in a mental health setting."

In many forums, participants identified steps residents and communities could take. According to a moderator from a Florida forum, their group wanted to coordinate "community services for comprehensive care" and highlighted that NGOs with missions related to mental health and drug rehabilitation should team up to have a greater impact. Many participants supported providing more opportunities for young people, greater emphasis on faith and community, and more mental health and substance abuse treatment options.

Insight 5: *The tone and tenor of these 2017 deliberations seemed dramatically different from clashes often captured on the news or in public meetings. Participants were willing to explore nuances, see positives and negatives of different options, and talk specifically about both changes they would like to see and the trade-offs those might entail. Participants in these forums typically saw no single organization or institution as the source of solutions but saw this issue as one on which we hold collective responsibility.*

In most of the 2017 forums, there was a strong sense that people wanted to make policing safer both for people of color and the police, and most saw this as an achievable goal. They didn't automatically accept the idea that if "black lives matter," then "blue lives" aren't as important, or vice versa. Terms such as "mutual

respect" and "fair treatment" came up again and again in the transcripts and moderator reports. The notion that we have a kind of collective responsibility for everyone's safety was a strong undercurrent in the discussions.

In this sense, participants seemed to suggest that police alone do not produce safety in communities. In fact, many stories and examples from the forums suggested the opposite. Forum participants repeatedly described the multiple factors that can produce safety and justice in their view: well-functioning police departments but also improving relationships, examining our own biases, and working to address issues such as education, poverty, mental health, and substance abuse.

It may be that the deliberations themselves caused participants to move toward that shared common ground. By gathering to discuss issues with others, forum participants share experiences, concerns, and ideas. In that sense, forum participants not only learn about the issue at hand, but they also learn from each other. They often leave the forums with a better understanding of and appreciation for "where people are coming from." Among participants returning questionnaires, almost half said that in the forums, they had talked about aspects of the issue they hadn't considered before. By deliberating with others, some participants leave the forums reconsidering preexisting opinions they had. "I never thought about it that way," is a common sentiment expressed across forums. When 2017 forum participants were asked, "Were there ideas or proposals that you tended to favor coming into the forum that you now have second thoughts about?" roughly one in five of those returning questionnaires said yes.

THE POTENTIAL OF PUBLIC DELIBERATIONS ON SAFETY AND JUSTICE

Overall, NIF forum participants were grappling with questions of safety and justice in ways that did not rely on easy answers. Nearly all seemed open to the perspectives of others and did not cling to predetermined opinions. Most participants tried to look for common ground and found some.

Perhaps most promising is how participants answered this open-ended question in the post-forum questionnaires: "What could citizens, working together, do in their communities to address this problem?" The responses generally fell into six categories:

1. *Strengthen relationships.* These responses featured statements such as "Police and citizens should meet together to talk about life as people, not as police vs. people," and "I think it just comes down to trying to understand where another person is coming from." Some of the responses in this category also focused on reducing bias and stereotyping.

2. *Strengthen community.* Many suggestions in this category were positive about the forums themselves: "Have more forums like this." Others fell in line with the idea that "establish[ing] a sense of community, working towards a common goal increases empathy in the community."

3. *Take responsibility.* Responses in this category emphasized the need for individuals to learn about the issues, become more aware of what is happening in their neighborhood, and "do

the right thing in the first place." "Citizens need to become aware," said one respondent. "Many people are oblivious to the world out there. If people opened their eyes, I think there would be more awareness on this issue."

4. *Take action.* These responses included a variety of ways for people to step forward on safety and justice, from simple actions such as "see something, say something" to "elect leaders that change the law and reform the criminal justice system" and "create community classes—free—that teach people about de-escalating and safe control of situations."

5. *Address causes.* Participants named a number of specific factors they thought played a role, and they listed ways to address them. "Advocate for drug and alcohol prevention, limit access to guns, and support treating mental health," said one. "Abolish the Second Amendment—replace lethal guns with tasers/other nonlethal weapons for self-defense. Require police to use tasers first if in life threatening situations, lethal weapons only as an absolute last resort," recommended another.

6. *Push police and justice system reform.* These responses included reforms that participants wanted to help implement. Some advocated for reforms that would implement or strengthen community policing or restorative justice. One participant wanted to "push harder for legislation that would further police training/'shaking up' the department for new recruits and phasing out older/corrupt officials."

These comments suggest that many forum participants believed that their own behavior and actions needed to change. This was not entirely "somebody else's problem."

This recognition, plus the open-mindedness about the complexity of the problems and the commitment to contribute to solutions, illustrate the potential of public deliberation on issues of safety and justice.

Appendix: List of Forum Locations

Aiken, SC

Ashland, OH

Auburn, AL

Baltimore, MD

Binghamton, NY

Birmingham, AL

Bloomfield, CT

Bloomington, IN

Boston, MA

Cleveland, MS

Crawfordsville, IN

Dayton, OH

Dundalk, MD

El Paso, TX

Fairfield, AL

Flagstaff, AZ

Greenfield, MA

Harrisonburg, VA

Honolulu, HI

Jacksonville Beach, FL

Jacksonville, FL

Manhattan, KS

Miami, FL

Montevallo, AL

New Orleans, LA

New York, NY

Panama City, FL

Randolph, MA

Rindge, NH

Salem, MA

Salina, KS

Savannah, GA

Seattle, WA

Sound Beach, NY

South Bend, IN

Starkville, MS

Sumter, SC

Tuscaloosa, AL

Valencia, CA

Washington, DC

Wichita, KS

Wilberforce, OH

Windsor, NY

The Kettering Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is: What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation.

The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of organizations that brings together citizens around the nation to talk about pressing social and political issues of the day. Thousands of community organizations, including schools, libraries, churches, civic groups, and others have sponsored forums designed to give people a public voice in the affairs of their communities and their nation.

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