
Safety, Justice, and Policing: Insights from 2017 Forums That Speak to Today

A Report from the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Network

June 2020

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.

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.

Five Key Insights 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.

Insight 2: Many of the 2017 forum participants found the idea of “community policing” (which first gained popularity in the 1990s) 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 sub-

stance 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.

About the Forums and Who Participated

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. 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 of 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 to *Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?* presents 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.

Moving Forward

In 2020, NIF will release an updated issue advisory on safety, justice, and policing that will offer options for action at the community and national level. Like all NIF issue guides, the purpose is to enable participants to deliberate on a wide range of actions, weigh the benefits and trade-offs of each, and think together about the best decisions for their own communities.

In 2020, NIF will also offer guides on rebuilding the economy and voting. All are designed to prompt deliberation and to help participants consider directions for addressing shared problems.

Appendix: List of Forum Locations

Aiken, SC	Miami, FL
Ashland, OH	Montevallo, AL
Auburn, AL	New Orleans, LA
Baltimore, MD	New York, NY
Binghamton, NY	Panama City, FL
Birmingham, AL	Randolph, MA
Bloomfield, CT	Rindge, NH
Bloomington, IN	Salem, MA
Boston, MA	Salina, KS
Cleveland, MS	Savannah, GA
Crawfordsville, IN	Seattle, WA
Dayton, OH	Sound Beach, NY
Dundalk, MD	South Bend, IN
El Paso, TX	Starkville, MS
Fairfield, AL	Sumter, SC
Flagstaff, AZ	Tuscaloosa, AL
Greenfield, MA	Valencia, CA
Harrisonburg, VA	Washington, DC
Honolulu, HI	Wichita, KS
Jacksonville Beach, FL	Wilberforce, OH
Jacksonville, FL	Windsor, NY
Manhattan, KS	

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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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