

Flames licked the husks of buildings and cars, engulfing every structure on the streets of a St. Louis suburb. The riots and fires in Ferguson, Missouri did not spark a radical change in the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. Instead, they illuminated an adversarial connection between communities of color and their police forces that has persisted for centuries in America.

According to Terrence Cunningham, the President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, there is "...a multigenerational...mistrust between many communities of color and their law enforcement agencies." (Calhoun). This mistrust has its roots in the days of systematic segregation and discrimination, enforced by police officers across the country. However, despite this pedigree of conflict, many law enforcement officials are either ignorant or unaware of the historical tensions that exist between their role and the communities that they serve.

The detriments of this conflict are immense. Both police officers and civilians are less safe when they cannot cooperate (Stoughton). Public skepticism of law enforcement agencies causes less reporting of crime and can lead to increases in crime and violence (Department of Justice). Meanwhile, police antipathy towards the community they serve can increase misconduct and further dissolve relationships (Stoughton). The International Association of Chiefs of Police recognizes the gravity of this issue, stating "...No single factor has been more crucial to reducing crime levels than the partnership between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve." (International Association of Chiefs of Police). The unrest and violence seen in Ferguson in 2014, Los Angeles in 1992, and Baltimore in 2015 demonstrate the horrific consequences that the complete dissolution of this partnership can have.

There are three prongs to an approach that could work to repair the frayed relationships between communities of color and the law enforcement agencies that serve them. First, of principal importance is opening law enforcement agencies to community oversight and involvement. With this step, a firm foundation of trust between the community and their law enforcement agencies could be built. The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing recommended: "...law enforcement agencies should make all department policies available for public review..." (Department of Justice). Additionally, the structure through which police officers are trained and promoted needs several changes. This step will demonstrate the law enforcement agencies' commitment to serving their public without bias. Implicit bias education and de-escalation of force instruction during officer training would serve this purpose well. Additionally, evaluating officers for promotion based on community engagement and crime reduction has worked to build community relationships in the Watts section of Los Angeles (Calhoun). Finally, law enforcement agencies need to prioritize forging and maintaining quality personal relationships with their communities. A network of connections between residents and those who serve and protect them makes everybody safer by reducing violence and involving the community in ensuring safety. There are several ways to create these relationships; Pop Up Barbeques have worked in Camden, New Jersey, while Operation Hoodsie (Ice Cream) Cup has succeeded in Boston (Calhoun). Involving the police in community activities can break down the us vs. them mentality that permeates many neighborhoods and instead foster mutual trust and safety.

The adversarial relationship between communities, often of color, and the law enforcement agencies that serve them has a long history. Though the flames of the Ferguson riots illuminated the strained connection that existed in one community, they also sparked a growing movement to rebuild

trust between police and their communities. The stakes are high, but each step towards cooperation brings the country closer to a safer and stronger America.

Works Cited:

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