

Key Findings from Public Deliberation with Community Members about Police Reforms

What Was the Study's Purpose?

The purpose of the study was to engage community members who typically do not participate in local police reform discussions to act as community representatives in a public deliberation process about police reforms. Three California communities were selected because they a) are actively addressing community violence prevention and/or trauma, b) are working on or interested in police reforms, and c) had local nonprofit organization or city manager leaders interested in helping researchers with the study.

What Did We Focus on in Our Public Deliberation?

The main deliberation question for participants was:

“Taking into account the unique circumstances in your local community, what police reforms are most acceptable in your local community in the next 1-3 years?”

Participants first read together and discussed background information on their community's unrestricted tax dollars that support policing. The information included the number of non-law enforcement personnel (e.g., social workers, first responders) that could be hired if 2% of the police budget was used for this purpose. Then, participants were given four police reform choices with detailed written descriptions of each (see page 3). These were developed by the UCD research team based on review of prior studies/publications, nonprofit websites, and discussions with research experts.

- Option 1** Increase transparency and accountability within policing
- Option 2** Enhance training of police to better match their current responsibilities
- Option 3** Reduce policing by shifting responsibility for non-violent responses (e.g., to other personnel such as mental health providers/social workers, EMTs/paramedics, peer providers)
- Option 4** Replace/re-imagine policing with other systems of community safety/justice.

Participants initially were asked to choose the option they felt best addressed the main question and then to discuss with the group their reasoning and justification for their choice. After this, they were asked if they wanted to change their choice based on the group discussion.

Everyone was assured that there are no right or wrong answers and that there are pros and cons for each option.

What Are the Key Findings About Preferred Police Reform Policies?

Option 4 (replace/re-imagine policing with other systems of community safety/justice) was the preferred policy, followed by **Option 3** (reduce policing by shifting responsibility to others for non-violent responses) and **Option 2** (enhance training of police to better match their current responsibilities). **Option 1** (increase transparency and accountability within policing) was by far the least preferred. The strong support for Option 4 overall was influenced by one community where two-thirds of participants voted for this option. In the other two communities, there were equal proportions of votes for Options 3 and 4.

What Were Some Community Reactions to the Police Reform Options?

Option 1: Increase Transparency and Accountability (8%)

Participants who spoke favorably about this option said that such changes would improve: a) public access to information and policing policies, such as using public records and body cameras; b) police infrastructure and representation of different racial and ethnic groups among police officers; and c) transparency of police practices and accountability for their actions. Many participants discussed a need for police to increase transparency and accountability in their actions if there is truly going to be a shift in trust of police from communities previously harmed by them.

Option 2: Enhance Training of Police to Better Match Their Current Responsibilities (18%)

Participants supporting this option said that such changes would promote improved responses through the use of non-violent and de-escalation methods. Training also would build trust and more positive relationships with the community. These participants felt that policing should not be only about responding to violent crimes, as could be the case with Option 3; rather, more training is needed in how to prevent and manage events that could potentially escalate.

Why Did We Use Public Deliberation?

The debate about police reforms is clouded by the limited evidence base for the effectiveness of reform efforts, in part due to uneven applications of reforms across agencies and contexts, the volume and recent implementation of reform ideas, the effect of factors other than law enforcement on crime rates, and incomplete data and accountability measures. One method that appears well-suited for investigating the nuance of perspectives on police reforms is public deliberation, which is a qualitative methodology that collects and analyzes public opinion and values through facilitated small group discussions. Three distinct characteristics of public deliberation are:

- 1) The topic is an ethical or value-based dilemma that requires an explanation of opinion and perspective,
- 2) Participants are members of the public encouraged to take a societal rather than a personal viewpoint, and
- 3) Participants are presented with unbiased facts and evidence at the outset of discussion.

Participants are encouraged to voice their own opinions and listen to others in an iterative process that may ultimately change their views. Even if no consensus is reached, deliberation can inform policymakers on areas of public interest and concern and is particularly useful for gaining perspectives from populations that may not usually be engaged in decision-making.

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Option 3: Reduce Policing by Shifting Responsibility of Non-Violent Response (28%)

Participants supporting this option said it makes sense to match people to jobs based on needs. Some said that non-violent issues handled by trained responders other than police can be more culturally appropriate. Many participants compared this option with Option 4, saying that they felt torn between the two. Several participants choosing this option said they did so because it would be more acceptable to other community members, especially in a 1-3 year timeframe. Some said they wanted to preserve the police institution; they perceived Option 4 as “abolishing police entirely” or “too extreme”.

Option 4: Replace/Re-imagine Policing with Other Systems of Community Safety/Justice (47%)

Participants voting for this option said that policing in America has been too resistant to reforms and too forgiving of harms caused by police; therefore, police remain unable to meet community safety needs in an equitable and fair manner. They said that Options 1-3 have already been tried and do not address the underlying causes of crime and violence. Several participants spoke about a constant fear of police, particularly for people from marginalized communities of color or LGBTQ communities, and they were adamant that public safety must be reimagined and rebuilt now to create systems and structures that actually meet people’s needs and create safe communities for all individuals. Some participants also viewed options 1-3 as steps towards Option 4 but stressed that Option 4 should be the ultimate destination.

Conclusion

The public deliberation sessions showed how perspectives on police reforms may be influenced by hearing the perspectives of others. Most participants (82%) agreed that the discussion expanded their views and 1 in 9 (11%) changed their vote after hearing others’ opinions. This suggests that public deliberation can be useful for facilitating candid conversations and soliciting valuable feedback about local police reforms from diverse community members. Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss the topic and learn from other community members in a respectful and open setting and agreed that the sessions were helpful in exploring the potential benefits and drawbacks to various police reform approaches. Most participants also expressed interest in taking future active roles in shaping policy options for police reforms in their communities, implying that public deliberation may be used to encourage interest in civic engagement around public safety issues.

In general, this study of diverse groups of people across three California communities showed that the majority are eager to see significant changes in local policing that will improve public safety and health outcomes. Many participants who voted for smaller-scale reforms in the near-term supported substantial shifts in policing and police funding in the longer term. There was also support for increasing use of other first responders and addressing underlying issues that may contribute to crime and violence. Local, state, and federal policymakers currently have an opportunity to reshape public safety in ways that are more inclusive of the needs of all community members, including those who have been most impacted by harmful policing actions in the past.

Who Participated in the Study?

CHARACTERISTICS	BOYLE HEIGHTS (N=40)	DAVIS (N=44)	SACRAMENTO (N=42)	OVERALL (N=126)
GENDER				
Women	69%	52%	69%	63%
Men	23%	48%	31%	34%
RACE/ETHNICITY				
Asian/Pacific Islander	—	2%	12%	5%
Black/African American	—	5%	33%	13%
Hispanic/Latinx	80%	—	17%	31%
White/Caucasian	8%	81%	24%	38%
Other race/ethnicity	3%	5%	7%	5%
More than one race/ethnicity	10%	7%	7%	8%
EDUCATION				
Less than a bachelor’s degree	38%	9%	21%	22%
Bachelor’s degree	43%	32%	31%	35%
Master’s degree or more	20%	59%	48%	43%

We conducted 13 sessions, 2 hours in length, with a total of 126 participants from three California cities (Boyle Heights (Los Angeles region), Davis, and Sacramento) via Zoom from late 2020 through early 2021. One session was conducted in Spanish and the rest in English. More than 60% of participants had children, and about half said that having children affected the way they viewed police reforms in their area.

For more information on this study, contact Shani Buggs at sabuggs@ucdavis.edu or Patricia Powers at pepowers@ucdavis.edu

Public Deliberation with Community Members about Police Reforms: Policy Options

<p>#1 Increase Transparency and Accountability within Policing</p> <p>This option focuses on various initiatives to improve existing police department operations. It increases agencies' transparency around police actions and adds various accountability measures to help ensure that police are conducting their jobs in a constitutional manner. Operational changes may include increased use of body cameras and public release of recordings, making records of police misconduct and complaints available to the public, and narrowing the acceptability of uses of force. They may also include bans of controversial tactics such as no-knock warrants. Increased accountability actions may include instituting an early warning system to be able to quickly identify and address officers with multiple discourtesy or misconduct complaints, requiring verbal warnings before using force, or requiring other officers to intervene to stop another officer from using excessive or unnecessary force. This option may involve limiting military grade equipment in local police departments and increasing the proportion of officers in the police agency that live in the communities they serve, particularly officers of color.</p>	<p>#2 Enhance Training of Police to Better Match Their Current Responsibilities</p> <p>As a society, we have increasingly left it to the police to address social and health problems in many of our communities and have not fully considered whether there are better ways to handle nonviolent disturbances. As such, police spend the majority of their time responding to issues that do not require police response. This option focuses on revamping police training to align more closely with their regular encounters with civilians and emphasizes less confrontational interactions between police and community members, for example, training officers to prioritize de-escalation techniques. This option includes implementing racial and implicit bias training for all officers. It also means overhauling police academy training so that cadets are trained more intensively on how to handle situations related to public disorder, homelessness, mental health crisis, or substance use/addiction.</p>
<p>#3 Reduce Policing by Shifting Responsibility of Nonviolent Response</p> <p>As a society, we have increasingly left it to the police to address social and health problems in many of our communities and have not fully considered whether there are better ways to handle nonviolent disturbances. As such, police spend the majority of their time responding to issues that might be better resolved by other social service or health responders. This option focuses on developing new types of personnel response to nonviolent problems, so that the police can direct more of their time and resources towards violent incidents. This means reducing policing activities and involves changes in personnel who respond to situations in the community that have traditionally involved a police response. As examples, a mental health provider such as a social worker or emergency personnel such as an EMT or paramedic may be sent to a situation involving a person who is having a mental health crisis, is homeless, or is dealing with drug dependency and/or addiction. Police would still utilize proactive policing tactics, such as pedestrian and vehicle stops, drug raids, and checkpoints, to deter violence.</p>	<p>#4 Replace/Re-imagine Policing with Other Systems of Community Safety/Justice</p> <p>The institution of policing has contributed to oppression in our society, and it has historically been used to violently control and segregate certain groups. The system also too often involves the application of violence in situations that could perhaps be resolved nonviolently. Particularly over the last 10 years, with the rise of video phones, the American public has been subjected to countless videos of civilians being killed, beaten, or tortured by law enforcement. As a result, many Black, Brown, and other marginalized groups around the country view the current system of policing as irreparable. This option focuses on replacing policing with other systems of public safety. It would emphasize reducing violence and harm while holding accountable those who violate the social contract of community safety. Under this option, communities will have the opportunity to work with local officials to create alternatives to policing that meet their specific needs/desires and involve nonviolent public safety and outreach. Such efforts would mean taking a preventive approach and viewing/addressing gun violence as a public health problem. This option includes reinvesting money previously allocated to law enforcement and corrections into areas such as community revitalization, economic stability, and youth development. It might also involve providing survivors of violence with crisis counselors and violence interruption/ intervention teams trained to assist with physical safety as well as mental, emotional, and financial resources.</p>

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