



NOBLE's *The Law and Your Community* Focus Group Executive Summary

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SUMMARY OF PROJECT

Law enforcement agencies across the country have been looking for innovative and meaningful ways to improve best practices by engaging, informing and learning from various communities, including young people. For the first time since its inception, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement (NOBLE) partnered with a juvenile justice agency to see what kind of an impact their *Law and Your Community* training had on delinquency system-involved youth in residential and secure care. Specifically, NOBLE sought to answer the question: Would youth who were already in the system see and interact with police differently once they had a better understanding of the purpose behind and duties of police officers? Presenting to young people in residential and secure settings gave NOBLE the chance to test out materials that until recently had been primarily used for prevention and early intervention purposes in places like schools, recreational facilities, etc. It also allowed NOBLE to contribute to young people's rehabilitation since out of home placements devote a great deal of time to life skill development.

BACKGROUND

The Law and Your Community is a nationally recognized hands-on interactive training program for young people designed to improve their communications with law enforcement officers and understanding of federal, state and local laws. Components are as follows:

- 1. Citizenship** - Provide short but insightful education of how our representative democracy works and role citizens play in that system.
 - o Explain why and how laws are made at the state, local and national levels.
 - o Stress importance of laws and their purpose in maintaining the health and welfare of society.
- 2. Law Literacy** - Increase participants knowledge base regarding common crimes that teens and young adults often find themselves charged with.
 - o Influence decision-making such that participants will avoid purposely or inadvertently engaging in criminal activity.
 - o Help participants analyze, evaluate and correct behavior that lead to entanglement in the criminal justice system.
- 3. Law Enforcement Engagement** - Educate participants on proper ways to respond during encounters with law enforcement and how to handle police misconduct (if it occurs).
 - o Explore what Community Policing is and is not.
 - o Discuss the realities of working in law enforcement.

METHODOLOGY

From April to October of 2017, two JDAI Research and Reform Specialists facilitated three focus groups with 26 residents. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. In these groups, JJC used a discussion guide, which was created in house, to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the training.

Group 1: Older youth in secure care facility - Twelve male residents from the Juvenile Medium Security facility

Group 2: Girls in residential care - Seven female residents from DOVES facility

Group 3: Youth in secure care facility - Seven male residents from the New Jersey Training School

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The presentation was broken into four major components: law enforcement and community policing; law enforcement rules of engagement; acts and decisions that make a person a criminal; and democracy and laws. Overall youth enjoyed the presentation and had positive feedback about the speaker. Youth retained and responded well to the concrete information about police practice, but their impressions of police motives and bias did not change.

Common themes emerged across all audiences that participated in the focus groups. These include:

Elements of community policing stuck with young people, but the philosophy behind and purpose of did not.

The nuances of community policing were harder for youth to grasp, but they understood strengthening the police department would require more people of color and individuals from underserved neighborhoods to join.

Youth had a better understanding of why law enforcement does certain things and carry themselves in a certain manner.

The presentation explained common police practices like why officers stand at an angle, where they park patrol cars during a stop and reasons they might approach a young person. Participants in all three groups walked away understanding many of the measures were precautionary, designed to keep the 3 officers and the person s/he was interacting with safe as opposed to aggressive or unnecessary actions police do “just because.”

Youth learned what to do when interacting with the police in various situations, including in the street, car and home.

Youth consistently recited the instructions on what to do and say when dealing with police in a variety of situations with law enforcement. The most powerful lesson they learned was “not to hold court in the street,” which they understood to mean do not argue with police or try to justify certain actions; speak calmly and politely; don’t incriminate themselves; and they have the right to remain silent when being questioned.

Youth gained knowledge about their rights, where to go for information about their rights and how to handle and report police misconduct.

Youth learned how to educate themselves about criminal charges, penalties, fines, court procedures, and expungements. They also learned the process to follow when reporting police misconduct, including what information s/he needed from the officer, as well as resources and organizations dedicated to helping individuals navigate the criminal justice system and assist when they feel they’ve been treated unfairly by police.

Youth acquired information that can be applied to their everyday lives when they return home.

The notion of *show respect, get respect* and *be smart when back in the community* are heard often by young people, but hearing directly from a police officer made a strong impression on audiences. Youth were surprised and excited to hear these common mantras can help them even when dealing with police. The reminder too that police were parents, cousins, and community members taught youth they weren’t dealing with an entity (police force) but a human being.

Perceptions about police being unfair persisted, in spite of the content and positive impression of the speaker.

Youth left with the impression that not all officers were bad and slightly more willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. However, when asked the question, “Did the presentation change your mind about how you see police,” a vast majority said no. Views about police bias remained unchanged and questions about the number and circumstances of police shootings remained unanswered.

The feedback about the presenter, Ms. Kim Nelson-Edwards, was overwhelmingly positive. She was described as energetic, approachable, honest, informative and invested in the material. Her style and passion made a strong impact on the young people, and appeared to be one of most critical factors in re-shaping some residents’ negative views about law enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth suggestions on **how to improve the presentation** included:

- More realistic scenarios and role plays
- Incorporate current events
- Deeper discussions about racism and individual rights
- Explanation of roles and duties of different types of law enforcement

Since the summer of 2014, **questioning of police practice and tactics** have become ubiquitous. While it might not be appropriate for police to lead a discussion on recent events and personal experiences, young people who attend this presentation should have an opportunity to discuss these topics in a private safe space.

Some elements of the presentation should be **tweaked to fit the needs and circumstances of the audience**. Taking into account the length of youths' sentences, offense history, etc. will be critical in making all young people feel hopeful about future opportunities.

For some youth, **no matter what they are doing, they will have contact with law enforcement**. Adolescents in general have strong reactions, and even more so when they feel like they are being treated unfairly or the person they are dealing with isn't being fair. That frustration sometimes leads youth to act out, so knowing how to handle themselves in these situations is critical to their safety. By acknowledging this reality, youth might be more inclined to believe law enforcement is committed to doing (some) things differently.