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A renewed look at police reform: Trust, training, and accountability

By Matt Sandgren | Thursday, March 23, 2023

Police reform is back in the news. Days after Congress [voted](#) to overturn a D.C. Council bill that would have overhauled the District of Columbia's criminal code, a group of Republicans in the House of Representatives [introduced](#) legislation to reverse a series of police reforms the D.C. Council enacted last year. Among the measures at issue are restrictions on the use of tear gas and the creation of a publicly accessible database of police discipline files.

These moves come on the heels of [President Biden's](#) recent push in his State of the Union speech for Congress to "finish the job" on police reform. Most Americans would agree that measures to improve police accountability, ensure officers are properly trained, and root out bad actors are a good thing. But what it means to "finish the job" on the issue and what commonsense police reform should look like are matters of significant disagreement. The fight over the recent D.C. measures is a case in point.

One line in the President's speech stood out to me in particular—when he talked about how important it is for law enforcement to "earn the community's trust." As the [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights](#) has explained, trust between officers and the communities they serve is essential to effective policing. When residents trust the officers who work in their neighborhoods, they are "more likely to report crimes, serve as witnesses, and comply with the law."

Trust, therefore, should be the touchstone of any police reform effort. The goal of lawmakers—and law enforcement officials advising lawmakers—should be to help police departments build trust and avoid the sorts of situations that can poison community relationships.

According to Orrin G. Hatch Foundation Legal Fellow [Christopher Bates](#), a direct line can be drawn between trust, training, and accountability. Training gives officers the tools they need to respond to high-stress, high-stakes situations. This helps them both do their jobs better, thus gaining the confidence of those they serve while also avoiding the sorts of mistakes that can cause trust to quickly evaporate. Accountability, in turn, gives communities confidence that when misconduct occurs, consequences will follow.

Start with training. Few would disagree that one of the greatest obstacles to trust between officers and the communities they serve is the unjustified or unlawful use of force that can occur when officers are not properly equipped to handle potentially dangerous situations.

Training on how to defuse and de-escalate such situations is at least as important as traditional firearms and tactical training.

But as [Mr. Bates](#) notes, as of 2017, “34 states did not require officers to receive de-escalation training, and even in states that did require such training, the required amount could be as little as one hour per year.” A [survey](#) of more than 280 police departments by the Police Executive Research Forum found that on average, new officers received 58 hours of firearms training and 49 hours of tactical training but only eight hours of de-escalation training. Providing funding and incentives for such training must be a central focus of police reform efforts.

Turning to accountability, success on this front involves more than merely reprimanding officers who step out of line—although that obviously is essential. Improved data collection on uses of force and officer-resident interactions can go a long way toward building trust and giving residents a clear view of what the officers in their communities are doing on the job.

As Mr. Bates puts it, “accurate, consistent data collection” helps “communicate to the public a correct understanding of the frequency of and circumstances surrounding officer uses of force.” It may be that uses of force are less prevalent, or more clear-cut, than many residents think. Or the opposite could be true. In either event, enabling residents to better understand what officers are actually doing in their communities can build trust by demystifying the job of policing, correcting misimpressions, and providing agencies added incentive to root out bad actors.

Unfortunately, many police agencies do not consistently track or report use-of-force data, particularly for nonfatal incidents or incidents involving nonlethal force. But a number of states and localities have been seeking to remedy this situation.

Arizona, for instance, recently passed a [law](#) requiring law enforcement agencies to report incidents involving death, serious bodily injury, or the discharge of a firearm to the state criminal justice commission. The Major Cities Chief Association—a coalition of police chiefs from the largest cities in the country—recently published [guidelines](#) recommending that agencies report all uses of force, including deadly force, non-deadly force, and any other physical contact (except contact pursuant to standard arrest procedures such as handcuffing), as well as any instance in which an officer draws a firearm.

These are but a few of the steps that can be taken to build trust between officers and the communities they serve. Mr. Bates identifies many more in a 2021 [report](#) he authored for the Hatch Foundation on police reform and other criminal justice issues.

There could be a genuine opportunity this year for lawmakers to make meaningful progress on police reform. Misguided calls to defund the police, reduce the size of police forces, or curtail officers’ ability to respond to threatening situations are not the answer. Instead, conversations should focus on trust, training, and accountability. Through these and other positive steps, we can help keep our communities safe and improve relations between our brave officers and those they are sworn to protect.

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