



Building Cooperation Between Law Enforcement and Immigrant Communities: Impactful Policies and Promising Solutions

Community policing policies are the cornerstone of effective law enforcement. These policies recognize that state and local law enforcement need the trust of the public, including immigrants, because fostering trust allows law enforcement to better understand and protect the communities they serve.

A. Background

For years, law enforcement officials have worked to build trust and cooperation between themselves and immigrant communities. This effort has sometimes been a challenge. Often, a lack of trust makes law enforcement's job much harder, especially when trying to solve crimes committed either within immigrant communities or against immigrants. Much of this distrust lies in the mistaken belief that has found root in immigrant communities, through destructive policies and deceptive messaging, that any interaction with law enforcement could lead to an inquiry of immigration status and possible subsequent deportation. This misunderstanding can lead to [higher levels of mistrust and noncooperation](#), which harms the public as a whole. While immigrant perpetrators of crimes have good reason to be concerned about potential immigration consequences, it is rarely true for others, particularly for immigrant witnesses or crime victims. Law enforcement professionals should take steps to foster trust and cooperation.

Building the necessary foundations to foster cooperation between immigrant communities and law enforcement is undeniably challenging but has proven to work in the past. There have been [numerous examples](#) of local law enforcement agencies building up these foundational pillars in their respective communities, leading to increased cooperation and reduced crime. However, these programs have largely arisen as a result of the initiative of individual law enforcement agencies, as opposed to coordinated federal leadership. Unless these types of trust-building initiatives are established and practiced across a wider cross-section of the country, there will continue to be mistrust between immigrant communities and law enforcement to the detriment of public safety.

This paper will describe some of the local programs currently in place that have proven to be successful in building trust and cooperation between law enforcement and immigrants while also enhancing community safety.

B. Policies that Foster Immigrant Cooperation

For immigrants to feel empowered to cooperate with law enforcement, there must be a foundation of trust. This trust can be built and nurtured through the creation of partnerships that help to erase [perceptions](#) that engagement with local law enforcement will entangle members of the immigrant community in immigration enforcement. When local law



enforcement agencies adopt programs and policies to facilitate this notion of cooperation, immigrants become empowered to assist them in investigating and solving crimes, whether committed against immigrants or others.

Many programs have already proven successful in facilitating the type of cooperation necessary for immigrant communities to become partners with law enforcement. The following will outline some of the more noteworthy program types working towards this goal.

C. Overcoming language and communication barriers

Often, immigrants arriving in the U.S. have limited English-language proficiency, which [makes communication difficult, including with law enforcement](#). Language barriers can occur in a variety of contexts, from casual interactions in the community to traffic stops to reporting crimes.

One way to overcome this communication barrier is to implement a [translator program](#), such as the one established in Eagle County, Colorado. This program allows law enforcement officials to use neutral third parties as translators, thereby increasing trust and cooperation from the non-English speaking population who might be intimidated by a translator directly employed by the law enforcement agency. Another way is to [communicate with immigrants in their native languages](#) through [media channels](#), such as radio stations, foreign-language phone lines, and social media. Finally, the [hiring of bilingual officers](#) can alleviate the need for translators and provide for a more natural interaction between law enforcement and immigrants.

[Many jurisdictions host programs](#) that actively utilize bilingual policing to serve their immigrant communities. The Rogers (Arkansas) Police Department attempts to include at least one Spanish-speaking officer in most of their police patrols, due to the high number of Spanish-speakers in the community. Additionally, the Pitkin County (Colorado) Sheriff's Office employs numerous bilingual officers and encourages its officers to learn a foreign language, offering to pay the costs associated with language courses.

D. Hiring and deployment of outreach officers

Community outreach officers can be another useful tool to help build trust and cooperation within the immigrant community towards law enforcement. They can serve as the vital link between immigrant communities and law enforcement, especially if they themselves are members of the immigrant community. For example, the Seattle Police Department [launched](#) its immigrant liaison program in 2015 with the goal of increasing constructive interactions between law enforcement officials and members of the immigrant community throughout the city. Its liaison officer visited areas of Seattle with large numbers of immigrants, such as places of worship, to spread the message that the police department served the entire community, including immigrants.



Additionally, hiring immigrant law enforcement officers can be a powerful tool to increase cooperation and trust with immigrant communities. The Minneapolis Police Department [hires](#) immigrant citizen officers from its large Somali and Ethiopian communities. With the help of the Somali American Police Association, over a dozen immigrants had become police officers in Minneapolis and surrounding jurisdictions by 2017.

E. Creating relationships with newly arrived immigrants

Relationship building between law enforcement and immigrant populations should begin soon after the immigrant's arrival in the U.S. Relationship building soon after arrival would help in [alleviating concerns](#) immigrants may have about law enforcement, especially for those from countries with weak rule of law or corrupt police departments. It would also help to prevent any spread of false rumors or perceptions recently arrived immigrants might have about the role of law enforcement in the U.S.

While this type of outreach is important among all immigrant populations, it is especially important for refugees. Because refugees have experienced trauma and distress in their home countries and often again in migrating to the U.S., it is vital that law enforcement agencies are able to provide them reassurance. Police departments in both [Fargo \(North Dakota\) and Houston have partnered](#) with local resettlement agencies to assure their recently arrived refugee populations that the police should not be feared and are allies that can be trusted. Once such preliminary trust forms, it can be used to enlist immigrant cooperation with law enforcement. [Baltimore](#) has also seen promising results with this approach.

F. Developing cultural understanding and competency

One of many reasons for initial misunderstandings and potential conflicts is a lack of cultural understanding between immigrants and law enforcement. For example, [behaviors or customs](#) that are considered normal in an immigrant's home country may be frowned upon or illegal in the U.S.

In these circumstances, it is helpful for law enforcement officers to become familiar with the customs and traditions of the immigrant populations in their communities to learn how to better handle any potential misunderstandings. Cultural training should not only [include](#) necessary information about a particular culture but also if an immigrant community has any unique needs or requires any unique services. It should also include treating these immigrant communities with respect and fairness, [concepts encouraged](#) by Pharr (Texas) Police Chief Andy Harvey in both Pharr and previously in Palestine, Texas.

G. Conclusion

Maintaining trust between immigrant communities and local law enforcement helps promote public safety. Immigrants can play a useful role in crime investigation and deterrence when they



have strong ties to local police and sheriffs' departments. The policies and programs described above, many of which have been successfully deployed by LEITF law enforcement agencies, have proven successful in encouraging cooperation from immigrant communities. They, along with other innovative ideas, demonstrate that law enforcement agencies are eager to conduct meaningful outreach to their immigrant communities to build trust and cooperation. Other jurisdictions stand to benefit if they follow the lead of these agencies and more widely adopt these kinds of outreach programs. Even better, efforts by the federal government to encourage these types of programs can lead to significant progress nationally.