

Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops

There is a growing disconnect between citizens and law enforcement officers in many cities across the United States. In no one group is this disconnect more pronounced than among our youth; research shows that, in some minority communities, entire generations of young people have grown up not trusting the police. This lack of trust means that youth are often scared of and unwilling to cooperate with police, causing many police contacts, however minor, to escalate into confrontations or arrests due to misunderstandings and fear between young people and police officers.

Background and Purpose

This fear and lack of trust has played out locally in Denver. In recent years, the Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM) has seen a marked increase in concerns from Denver youth and their family members about minor contacts with police that escalated unnecessarily. A common theme among these incidents is a lack of communication between youth and officers, as well as a lack of knowledge. Many youth do not understand their rights or their responsibilities during law enforcement contacts and some officers do not understand how a lack of emotional maturity shapes the way teens act when confronted. ***The Bridging the Gap Program seeks to proactively improve relationships between youth and law enforcement in Denver by educating youth on their rights and responsibilities when in contact with law enforcement, and educating officers on key aspects of adolescent development and de-escalation techniques when contacting youth.***

What is the Bridging the Gap Program?

With start-up funds from a Colorado Justice Assistance Grant, the OIM has developed and tested a curriculum that is now being used in forums with youth and law enforcement in Denver. Building upon national best practices, the project features:

- **Youth and Police Engagement:** Through a partnership with the Denver Police Department, the OIM conducts five hour forums which allow for youth and police officers to share their experiences and learn together with the help of community facilitators.
- **Education on Adolescent Development and Emotional Intelligence:** Using an evidence-based curriculum from Connecticut Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, police officers receive a full day of training on adolescent development and de-escalation techniques with youth as part of *Effective Police Interactions with Youth*, which is taught by trainers in the Denver Police Department and focuses on how adolescents think and how that shapes the way they act when approached by the police.
- **A Sustainable Model Rooted in the Community:** With strong community partnerships, the program has a wide reach throughout diverse communities in Denver, and employs a “train-the-trainer” approach that is intended to cultivate a team of experts in the community and in law enforcement who can sustain the program over time.
- **A Testable, Replicable Model:** Working with a team of evaluation advisors ensures that program outcomes will be testable in the long-term, creating a model that can be evaluated and eventually adapted by other jurisdictions that have taken on the charge of improving relationships between their youth and police.



THE YOUTH OUTREACH PROJECT
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