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**Policing in Arab-American Communities After September 11**

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## Policing in Arab-American Communities After September 11

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed the face of law enforcement in the United States. They also had a great impact on Arab-American communities. This study by the Vera Institute of Justice examines how the changes have affected policing in Arab-American neighborhoods.

### What did the researchers find?

Many Arab-Americans were troubled by increased government scrutiny of their communities following the terrorist attacks. Indeed, some Arab-American communities said they were more afraid of law enforcement agencies — especially federal law enforcement agencies — than they were of acts of hate or violence, despite an increase in hate crimes. They specifically cited fears about immigration enforcement, surveillance and racial profiling.

Four significant obstacles to improved relations between police and Arab-American communities emerged:

- Distrust between Arab-American communities and law enforcement.
- Lack of cultural awareness among law enforcement officers.
- Language barriers.
- Concerns about immigration status and fear of deportation.

The study also revealed some promising practices for addressing these obstacles. Although this study focused on Arab-Americans, many of the best practices are consistent with general principles of community policing. The researchers believe they will be useful for improving relations between law enforcement and a wide range of communities, especially geographically concentrated immigrant communities. A more detailed report is available from the Vera Institute of Justice.<sup>1</sup>

*Nicole J. Henderson, Christopher W. Ortiz, Naomi F. Sugie  
and Joel Miller*

## Policing in Arab-American Communities After September 11

For the past 20 years, local police agencies have worked to build stronger ties with the communities they serve. These “community policing” efforts have increased public safety and security as partnerships between law enforcement agencies and community groups have been effective at identifying and defusing community disputes.

However, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have led to a host of new concerns about public safety. Communities across the nation — from small towns to sprawling cities — are wrestling with security issues that did not exist a decade ago. These issues are especially complex for communities with significant Arab-American populations.

After Sept. 11, law enforcement agencies on both the local and federal levels experienced great pressure to prevent further attacks. Some researchers and law enforcement officials suggested that local law enforcement agencies should play a greater

role in intelligence-gathering and immigration enforcement. In addition, the FBI began to stress counterterrorism efforts, with Joint Terrorism Task Forces working in concert with local law enforcement agencies. Often, these efforts focused on Arab-American communities.

At the same time, local law enforcement agencies were called on to protect the Arab-American community. After the attacks, some people of Arab descent said they experienced increased levels of harassment, ranging from workplace discrimination to verbal abuse and vandalism to severe hate crimes such as assault and homicide. To ensure the safety of Arab-Americans, some local law enforcement agencies felt it necessary to step up their outreach efforts.

Finally, some Arab-Americans and law enforcement officers said that public suspicion of Arab-Americans had led to an increase in false reporting. As one FBI special agent said, “The general public calls in

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## STUDY METHODS

The study was conducted in 16 sites across the country, each of which is home to a geographically concentrated Arab-American community. For each site, researchers did telephone interviews with people from three groups: local law enforcement officers, FBI agents assigned to local field offices, and members of the Arab-American community. Researchers then held focus group discussions and in-person interviews at four sites.

### What Were the Study's Limitations?

This study focused on Arab-American communities that are concentrated in specific regions, and the law enforcement agencies that serve them. However, such concentrated communities are not necessarily representative of the Arab-American population as a whole. In addition, although researchers interviewed FBI agents from local field offices at each site, they did not interview agents from other federal law enforcement agencies, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement or the U.S. Attorney's Offices.

some ridiculous stuff — it's really guilt by being Muslim." Because officers have to look into all reports, false reporting can be a significant strain on law enforcement agencies.

Arab-American communities have been deeply affected by the events of Sept. 11 in other ways. Before the attacks, many Arab-Americans were well assimilated into the American mainstream.<sup>2</sup> But after Sept. 11, some members of Arab-American communities came to believe that many of their fellow citizens — not

to mention some in the media and government — regarded them with suspicion. Although Arab-Americans report a fair amount of goodwill towards local law enforcement agencies, some Arab-Americans said these developments have strained relations between their communities and those agencies. Also, some members of Arab-American communities said they fear federal policies and practices more than violence.

Researchers from the Vera Institute of Justice, examining how post-Sept. 11 law enforcement changes have affected policing in Arab-American neighborhoods (see "Study Methods"), identified four primary and inter-related obstacles to improved relations between law enforcement and the Arab-American community:

- Distrust between Arab-American communities and law enforcement.
- Lack of cultural awareness.
- Language barriers.
- Concerns about immigration status and fear of deportation.

Fortunately, many law enforcement officials and

community leaders generally agree on how to address these obstacles.

## Distrust

Distrust between Arab-American communities and law enforcement was by far the most commonly cited barrier to improved relations. Although most respondents stressed distrust of law enforcement by the local Arab-American community, a few officers mentioned that the distrust is reciprocal.

Although much of the distrust in Arab-American communities stems from post-Sept. 11 developments, not all of it does. Recent immigrants often feel uncomfortable about approaching law enforcement.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true of immigrants from countries with brutal governments or widespread police corruption. As one local business leader explained, “[Many] Arabs come from [countries with] very authoritarian, dictatorial regimes. The police are run by the state. So from [their] perspective, [approaching law enforcement] is bad news.”

The surveys suggest a number of practices that can help:

**Begin or improve communication.** Reaching out to the local community is the key to building trust. As one sergeant in the public affairs division of a department with an active outreach program noted, “Having a good relationship with the community helps patrol officers do their jobs.” In setting up an outreach effort, law enforcement agencies will want to consider the following points:

- *Reach out in person.* Several people stressed the importance of face-to-face meetings as opposed to phone or e-mail contact. One community leader pointed out that “fliers aren’t enough,” while another explained that the Arab-American community has a strong “oral culture.” Outreach efforts were most successful when they used a three-pronged approach: first send a letter, then make a phone call and finally follow up with a personal visit.
- *Meet with the community regularly.* Regular contact between the community and law enforcement agencies is important, and helps break down misconceptions and build trust. At one site, a potentially volatile instance

of miscommunication was resolved by discussions in a series of regularly scheduled community forums.

- *Use community contacts to set up meetings.* When arranging meetings, it can help to have a member of the Arab-American community set up the contact: “A non-Arab who invites [members of the Arab-American] community to dinner or to a function will not have the same turnout as if someone from the Arab-American community invites them on [law enforcement’s] behalf.”
- *Hold meetings in the community as opposed to the precinct headquarters.* This is an effective way to address the fear and hesitation that community members may feel about contacting the police.
- *Include patrol officers in community meetings.* Patrol officers said that community meetings are important. However, some felt that they should play a larger role in these events. One patrol officer described a meeting in which he and his colleagues “were sent in at the beginning to show our faces and meet and greet, but when the meeting started they sent us on our way.” Including patrol officers in community meetings gives them a stake in building stronger relations between law enforcement and the community.
- *Set up an open-door policy.* At one site, the chief of police held office hours for community members once a week. He said this policy allowed him to engage community members in “one-on-one dialogue.”
- *Schedule community meetings for suitable times.* Often, certain times — such as Friday prayer for Arab-Muslim communities — are not suitable for community meetings.

**Create a police-community liaison position.** By registering complaints, giving advice or just meeting with community members, liaison officers can address potential problems before they intensify and require the intervention of patrol officers. The status of liaison officers varies from one location to another. Some are appointed by the chief of police or another administrator, while others assume the role on their own initiative and work in a more



informal capacity. In creating a liaison position, agencies will want to consider the following points:

- *Get institutional support and backing of the police chief.* Liaison officers who report directly to the police chief and enjoy the institutional support of the department are the most effective in building trust between law enforcement and the Arab-American community. Because these officers are freed from their regular duties, they can focus all of their time and energy on community concerns.
- *Promote visibility and accessibility.* A successful liaison officer is accessible to the community. One effective liaison officer gave out his cell phone number, home number and e-mail address, and set up a Web site where the community could learn about the police department and send questions to the department. Holding office hours in the community is another way to increase accessibility.
- *Foster a connection to the community.* The liaison officer needs to be culturally competent. Most of the

liaison officers interviewed for this study either spoke Arabic or were of Arab descent.

### **Recruit within Arab-American communities.**

Officers and community members agreed that having more Arab-Americans on the police force would help overcome fear of law enforcement. In jurisdictions with little precedent for cooperation between law enforcement and the community, recruitment efforts are likely to be greeted with suspicion. "I've seen ads for officer recruitment in our local Arabic newspapers," one community member told researchers. "Why didn't they want to recruit us before?"

The following measures are likely to boost recruitment among Arab-Americans:

- *Focus on young people.* Because young people are less likely to have had negative experiences with law enforcement, reaching out to them by having officers work in schools can help break down barriers.
- *Translate recruiting materials into Arabic.* At one site, the police department translated recruiting materials into

Arabic and gave them out at police-community forums.

**Be aware that officers may face skepticism when they first reach out to communities.** Cultural training programs, advisory councils, regular meetings with the community and other outreach efforts all help build trust. However, officers should be prepared to face some skepticism when they first reach out to the Arab-American community. If their commitment is genuine, even skeptics can be won over.

### Lack of cultural awareness

Many community leaders stressed the need for improved cultural awareness among law enforcement personnel. Police officers also felt that a deeper knowledge of Arab-American culture would make it easier to respond to calls and mediate disputes.

Setting up cultural awareness training and education is one promising practice. Law enforcement agencies have traditionally responded to their officers' changing vocational needs by offering

comprehensive training programs. Such programs are well-suited to educating officers about Arab-American culture. When asked what makes a cultural awareness program effective, officers stressed that it must be both practical and relevant to their everyday work. In particular, officers wanted to learn more about the following topics:

- Islam and religious practices.
- Arab culture.
- Basic Arabic words and phrases.
- Cultural considerations when questioning someone.
- Cultural considerations when arresting someone.

The most successful training programs set the following goals:

**Collaborate with the community.** Leaders from the local Arab-American community played a role in developing the training programs that were most effective. Programs that are developed this way are better equipped to address a community's specific needs. Because many community leaders are eager

and willing to teach others about Islam and Arab culture, they are valuable partners.

**Reach rank-and-file officers.**

Cultural awareness programs need to target the patrol officers who work with the Arab-American community regularly. At one site, an officer remarked that relations between law enforcement administrators and the community were good, but that “among the rank and file there are serious problems ... local police officers do not know the community.”

**Bring training sessions into the community.**

In one innovative training program, officers left the classroom to visit local Arab-American and American Muslim communities. Officers met with community members and visited a mosque.

## Language barriers

Reaching out to those with limited knowledge of English is important, especially for agencies that serve communities with large immigrant populations. Although language barriers can significantly undermine police-community relations, most barriers can be effectively broken down through simple measures.<sup>4</sup>

Community leaders are often willing to help out with translation or language training. Inviting them to do so strengthens relations between the local community and law enforcement.

**Offer basic language training.**

For officers working in Arab-American neighborhoods, basic language training is essential. As one community member explained, “The new immigrant hardly speaks any English. When they encounter an officer, they cannot understand them and that causes a problem.”

**Encourage officers to learn Arabic.**

Some police departments offer incentives (such as compensatory time) for officers who enroll in Spanish classes. It makes sense to do the same for those who study Arabic.

**Provide incentives for Arabic-speaking officers.**

In police departments across the country, Spanish-speaking officers receive pay bonuses. However, none of the police departments under study offered bonuses for Arabic speakers.

**Translate written materials and provide interpreters.**

Having Arabic interpreters at community meetings and

providing Arabic translations of commonly used forms and informational pamphlets is helpful.

## Concerns about immigration status and fear of deportation

Many community leaders expressed concern about the involvement of local law enforcement agencies in immigration enforcement. They noted that threats of deportation or other forms of pressure related to immigration status have been used to seek information. As a result, they said, some members of the community hesitate to report crimes.

Survey responses favored one practice: set up clear and consistent policies. Because immigration and counterterrorism enforcement practices vary from one police department to another, and even from one FBI field office to another, many Arab-Americans are unclear about the enforcement practices of their local police. This lack of clarity can significantly undermine a department's ability to build strong community ties. As one community leader explained, "The police need to establish ground rules. We

don't know what the local and federal police will and won't do." Local police departments should carefully consider whether to engage in immigration enforcement, and then communicate their policies to the community. They should also develop policies against racial profiling or, if they already have such policies, reinforce them.

## What can communities do?

Efforts by law enforcement organizations are unlikely to succeed without active involvement from the community itself. Law enforcement agencies and communities need to work together. As one community leader put it, "We have to educate [the police] about our culture, and they have to educate us about [police] culture." The research suggests several activities for community leaders who want to reach out to local law enforcement agencies:

**Start making contacts with law enforcement.** Community leaders can invite police officials to events in the community and attend precinct or station meetings in the neighborhood.

**Offer cultural and linguistic support services.**

Leaders can offer to help develop culturally suitable training materials for police officers. They can help lead training sessions that focus on cultural awareness and offer translation services.

**Help with recruiting efforts.**

Leaders can work with law enforcement on recruiting initiatives in their communities.

**Promote community awareness about police practices.**

Leaders can take part in training sessions the police department offers for community members. They can tell the community about such topics as local laws and codes, and how and when to contact the police.

**Lobby for a liaison position.**

Leaders can let their local police department know that a liaison officer would help build trust, and identify community leaders who might fill such a role informally.

**Strengthen community organization within and across communities.**

Leaders can build community solidarity and reach out to other communities in their area. Law enforcement agencies look for strong

community leaders who are easily identifiable.

Renewed dedication to the principles of community policing can lead to positive, trusting relations between law enforcement and the Arab-American community — even in the current environment of concern about national security. Both groups want improved relations, and both groups agree that the practices outlined here are a good place to start.

**NOTES**

1. Henderson, Nicole J., Christopher W. Ortiz, Naomi F. Sugie, and Joel Miller, *Law Enforcement & Arab American Community Relations After September 11, 2001: Engagement in a Time of Uncertainty*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2006. Available online at [http://www.vera.org/publication\\_pdf/353\\_636.pdf](http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/353_636.pdf).
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Membership and Community Efficacy," *Crime and Delinquency* 49 (4) (October 2003): 564-580; Pogrebin, M.A., and E.D. Poole, "Culture Conflict and Crime in the Korean-American Community," *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 4 (1990): 69-78; Song, J., "Attitudes of Chinese Immigrants and Vietnamese Refugees Toward Law Enforcement in the United States," *Justice Quarterly* 9 (1992): 703-719.

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