

SAFETY & JUSTICE



Deliberative
Dialogues

*How Should Communities Increase Safety and
at the Same Time Ensure Justice?*

A summary report of findings from the 2017 community dialogues on the issue of safety & justice hosted by Community Advancement Network and Interfaith Action of Central Texas.

OVERVIEW

During the Fall of 2017, Community Advancement Network (CAN) and Interfaith Action of Central Texas (iACT) hosted three deliberative dialogues with community members on the topic of Safety and Justice. While local crime rates in our community have declined over recent years, many people still do not feel safe and/or feel that they are not being treated fairly when it comes to law enforcement and criminal justice. These deliberative dialogues brought community members together to discuss and consider how we can increase safety in our community and at the same time ensure justice.

Similar conversations have been happening across the country as part of the *National Issues Forums (NIF)* process in which communities host forums utilizing the NIF issue guide. Participants share their experiences and views, weigh trade-offs for specific policy solutions, and see where they may have common ground. These facilitated conversations help people better understand the issue from different perspectives and learn what other community members think and feel about the issue. By engaging residents and law enforcement together, new ideas emerge and an increased sense of goodwill and trust can be fostered as people thoughtfully discuss their concerns and priorities. The output from these conversations not only informs local policy makers and community leaders, but is incorporated into the results from the national conversations which NIF shares during “A Public Voice”, their annual convening of policymakers in Washington, DC.



PROCESS

During October and November, CAN and IACT held three deliberative dialogues on the issue of Safety and Justice. In preparation for the dialogues, a three-hour facilitation training was conducted by Civic Collaboration. Over two dozen volunteers were trained to facilitate the discussions and capture key points. During the dialogue, facilitators fostered participation and deliberation, and note-takers ensured that the conversation highlights were captured.

Each 2.5-hour event was free and open to the public. The dialogues were hosted at St. Edward’s University, University Presbyterian Church and Huston-Tillotson University. After sharing a meal, attendees heard a brief presentation about the deliberative dialogue process and watched a short video describing the NIF issue guide to be used during the facilitated small-group discussion.

The NIF issue guide provides a framework for people to explore how communities might increase safety while at the same time ensuring justice. It offers three different options for deliberation, each rooted in different, widely shared concerns and different ways of looking at the problem. No one option is the “correct” one; each includes drawbacks and trade-offs that are important to grapple with in order to make progress on this issue. They are not the only options available, rather they are presented as a starting point for deliberation.

SAFETY & JUSTICE ISSUE GUIDE

OPTION 1 - Enforce the Law Together: *Expand policing while strengthening community-police partnerships.*

This option says that our top priority should be finding ways for communities and police to work together to stop violence of all kinds. Most Americans want safer streets and communities. Through neighborhood watch programs and community policing, citizens and police should identify sources of violence and work together to stop it.

OPTION 2 - Apply the Law Fairly: *Remove injustices, reform inequities and improve accountability.*

This option says that only by addressing basic injustices and implicit bias in law enforcement and the courts can safety for all be achieved. Currently, the law is not enforced or applied fairly. From dealing with the ways people of color are treated on the streets to unequal sentencing in the courts, widespread reforms are needed in order to restore trust and reduce violence.

OPTION 3 - De-escalate and Prevent Violence: *Reduce the culture of violence and take direct actions to disrupt conflict.*

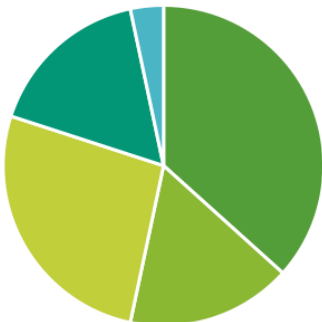
This option says that violence itself is the most urgent threat and should be directly addressed. We should commit to the de-escalation of violence, by police and the larger society. The police are often the first responders to mental health, domestic, and drug abuse crises that they are not always trained to handle. We should provide more mental illness and substance abuse treatment so there are fewer such episodes.

The aim of the dialogue was not to select any one option as the best alternative, but rather to begin to identify common values, consider the benefits and drawbacks of possible actions, and identify any areas of common ground and issues that still need to be worked through. During the 2-hour dialogue, participants shared their views and experiences, learned about other’s perspectives, and grappled with the tensions between things people hold deeply valuable, such as personal freedom, fair treatment for all, and an individual and collective sense of security. At the conclusion of the dialogue, attendees were asked to fill out the NIF questionnaire to provide their opinions on topics related to the safety and justice discussion. Data from these responses is reflected in the charts in this report.

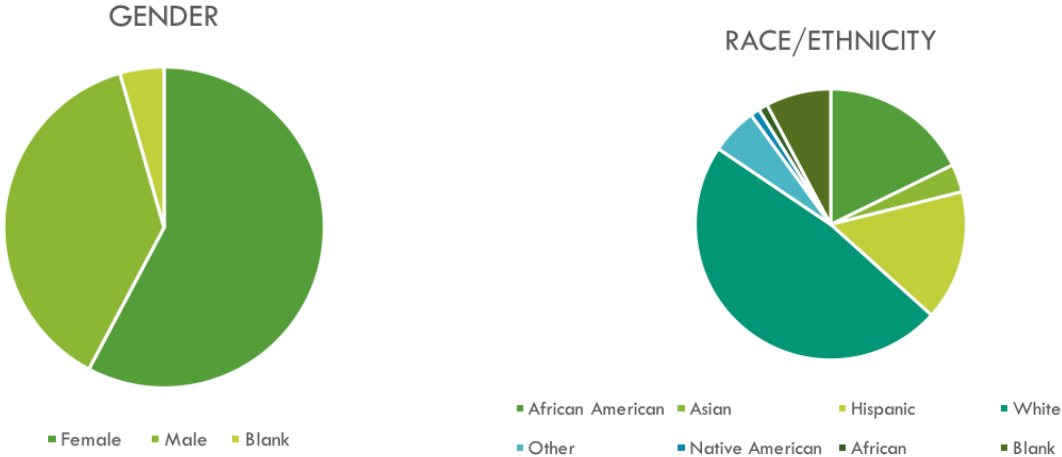
PARTICIPANTS

Each dialogue session was attended by approximately 20-40 people, with people broken out into small groups of 6-10. A total of 90 people participated in the dialogues. Police officers from the Austin Police Department participated at each small-table discussion at every event. Attendees ranged in age from teens to seniors and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Over 45 different zip codes were listed in the questionnaires.

AGE



■ 18 to 30 ■ 31 to 45 ■ 46 to 64 ■ 65 and over ■ Blank



FINDINGS

The dialogues forums uncovered a variety of perspectives about what we should do to increase safety in our community while at the same time ensure justice. For the most part, the deliberations focused on:

- **Strengthening ties between the police and the community**
- **Increasing education and training**
- **Encouraging engaged and responsible community members**
- **Accountability and transparency in the justice system**
- **Addressing broader systemic and societal issues**

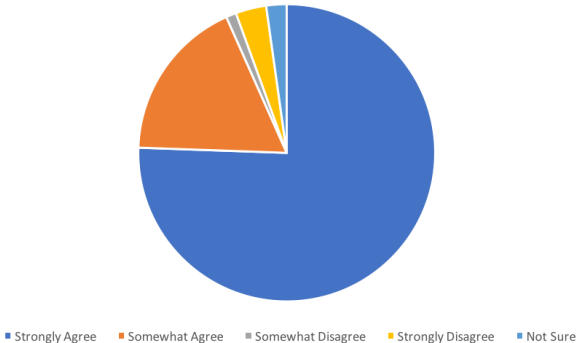
For each of these themes that emerged, participants explored areas where they felt improvement was needed and potential impact of making change, as well as possible downsides that needed to be considered.

Strengthening Ties Between the Police and the Community

Across the conversations, a recurring priority discussed by participants was the need to create stronger relationships between community members and the police. Most participants emphasized the value of working together to foster respect, understanding and communication. Creating more everyday, positive interactions was seen as a foundation for overcoming biases, breaking down stereotypes, and building mutual trust. Participants discussed possible strategies to foster closer ties, while also raising concerns about trade-offs these actions could have.

For example, community policing was broadly seen as a positive approach, where officers could work in a more pro-active and collaborative way with communities. However, some raised concerns about how a larger police presence could make people feel “overly policed” and monitored. Others saw constraints around the police department’s budget, staffing and time availability. The idea of police officers living in the communities they served was seen as positive. However, some viewed this as unrealistic. Limitations were raised, such as the availability

We urgently need to increase understanding and mutual respect between police and people of color.



of housing affordable to officers and the need for separation between professional and personal life. Overall, more face-to-face interactions and greater partnering between police and community members were seen as key ways of building bridges of mutual aid and support.

Increasing Education and Training

Participants explored a variety of dimensions around the topic of education and training, both for police officers, as well as for the community. Topics raised regarding police officer training included training in implicit bias, de-escalation and handling mental health and substance use disorders. Participants discussed existing APD training. For example, one officer shared that APD officers have 40 hours of de-escalation instruction as part of their basic training course, which is twice as much as is state mandated. Most participants felt that there is a need for more community awareness of police training programs already in place. When discussing trade-offs, some raised concerns that investing resources in training could impact funding for other police department needs. Others were concerned about there not being enough time for officers to receive more training while meeting their other job demands.



The conversations also explored the importance of conducting more education and training in the community. There was a particular emphasis on providing education in schools. While recognizing the financial and time burden, many supported the idea of curriculum developed in collaboration with police and delivered to elementary and middle school students to educate them on a range of issues related to police-community interactions. Some shared the view that all individuals would benefit from implicit bias and cultural competency training.

Encouraging Engaged and Responsible Community Members

Participants broadly supported the idea that community members play an important role in improving safety in their neighborhoods. They felt that responsible actions by individuals, greater involvement and neighbors “working together and being watchful over each other” could help decrease problems and strengthen a sense of community. A number of ideas were explored, such as increasing neighborhood watch programs, holding community meetings on safety issues, and encouraging people to report crimes. Some supported the idea of individuals “stepping up and taking responsibility” in certain situations, such as intervening in non-violent gang activities.

However, there were significant concerns expressed about some of the possible actions individuals might take. Many felt that intervening in situations would be a risk to personal safety. Others felt that without proper preparation or skills, people could make situations worse. The issue of neighborhood watch programs raised concerns of residents using it as retributions against neighbors they don’t like. People felt there were a number of barriers that keep witnesses from reporting crimes or getting involved in investigations, such as fear of retaliation, getting time off work or lack of transportation. Some participants said that, whether due to lack of time or interest, cynicism or past trauma around law enforcement, some people don’t want to

It’s challenging to reach critical mass to get community involvement. Many community meetings I’ve gone to have maybe a dozen or two participants where I’d like to see a hundred or more.
- dialogue participant

participate and we simply can't make people engage with their neighbors.

Accountability and Transparency in the Justice System

The conversations regarding accountability and transparency focused a great deal on police officers use of body cameras. Most participants felt that it was a good thing that APD officers will now be wearing body cameras, as they viewed these cameras as important tools for transparency and accountability. They saw cameras as a way to protect both the police and the public, and that recordings helped hold officers to a higher standard. Some were concerned, however, that cameras compound the level of scrutiny officers are already under, potentially impacting their responses and having a negative effect on officer recruitment and retention. Other considerations were the resource implications, concerns over privacy and consent, and the role of social media in escalating violence. Some felt the body cameras are not the “end-all cure”, as they don't show all aspects of what happened in a situation. However, on balance, most people supported the use of officer body cameras.



Many participants felt that both police officers, and the broader criminal justice system, must be held to rigorous, high accountability standards in order to have a more positive community impact and foster greater trust. Some wanted more evaluation on what happens to people after they're arrested and more information and statistics on fines, jail times, community programs and representation in court to help illuminate areas for improvement. Others felt that laws holding the police accountable were either non-existent or ineffective. The conversation also explored practices like stop-and-frisk, which the majority of questionnaire respondents felt should not be used. Others shared concerns over sentences for non-violent crimes, with some expressing support for substance abuse programs instead of jail time for small drug possession arrests.

Addressing Broader Systemic and Societal Issues

Across the dialogues, participants covered a wide range of societal and systemic issues that impact communities everywhere as they strive for a safer and more just society. The challenges of addressing racism and bias were raised repeatedly. Many expressed concern not only for bias in police, but in the broader justice system, including judges and prosecutors. Other issues raised ranged from inequality in sentencing, drug policy and incarceration rates of low-level offenders, to inequity in school funding, insufficient services and barriers to re-entry for offenders. Conversations also touched on the impact of media and social media on the broader social narrative, and the larger question of the root causes of violence.

One area that came up repeatedly in discussions was the issue of how best to address mental health and substance abuse, and the role of police in those circumstances. Many felt that the failure to fund mental health treatment and substance use disorder treatment is a big part of the problem. People said it was unfair to police that they are the primary interventionists in situations of a mental health crisis. While people recognized the resource implications, there was broad support for more investment in mental health treatment. People wanted more mental health training for officers, but also were very interested in shifting that role off of police officers to other trained professionals.

Another extensive topic of discussion was related to guns. Some people were concerned about the level of access to guns and that it should be harder for people to get guns. There were mixed views about gun buy-back programs, with some participants feeling this would be positive, while others felt that only law-abiding individuals would sell back their guns. Conversations also touched on “stand your ground” laws and concerns over people being more “brazen and bold” and situations involving guns escalating into greater violence.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

As people discussed what was important to them and deliberated the positive aspects and potential drawbacks of various approaches, they identified specific actions that could be taken by individuals, community groups, law enforcement officials, policy makers, etc. The summary below organizes the range of suggested actions:

Engagement & Communication

- Encourage community policing
- More dialogues on this and other topics
- Reach out to more police
- Help people to report crime anonymously / smart phone
- Increase visibility of officers at neighborhood gatherings
- Go to more “Coffee with Cops” events
- Meet families where they are – go into homes, be flexible
- Have police at rec centers; shoot hoops, put on programs
- More police on bikes
- Develop partnerships
- Have “communication campaign” between police and citizens
- Use apps like “Next door”, online postings, and listservs
- Notify neighborhood about “stepped-up” police activity
- Have officers in schools eating lunch and hanging out with kids
- Teach kids to know police officers, interact with police
- Tell our City Council member what we think

Addressing Mental Health Issues

- Addressing mental health responses differently
- Continue community partnerships, such as the Mobile Crisis Outreach Team, that provide psychiatric therapists on call
- Mental health pilot like Dallas
- Increase resources for the sobriety center and expand use of it
- Better access to resources for non-emergency calls.
- Different call system to re-route non-emergency calls
- Funding for mental health, on demand or treatment services

Training & Education

- Officer training on mental health, anti-bias, de-escalation, cultural competency
- Knowing your rights as part of the education program
- National standards for police and training specifying hours and curriculum.
- Training in recognizing biases (law enforcement, court officials, individuals)
- Invest in education and include parents
- Require gun education before gun purchases/ownership
- Teach law early – elementary and middle school
- Police share with community what kinds of crimes were occurring
- Learn how to treat police officers with respect

Other

- Use technology to report crimes
- Provide living wages
- Build a diverse police force
- Obtain community guidance on laws
- Look at what’s working and replicate
- Task specific division with enforcing specific laws, such as traffic enforcement
- Review sentencing requirements for low-level drug crimes

Promoting deliberation. Deepening understanding. Informing policy. Encouraging action.

These are among the aims of the deliberative forums hosted by CAN and IACT. Many participants shared that they appreciated the opportunity to hear a variety of ideas and perspectives. They also valued engaging with, and learning from, the police officers. Forums produce rich insights that go beyond typical public opinion polls by examining the values and beliefs that underlie people’s thinking on the issue, requiring them to weigh

the trade-offs of different approaches, and asking them to consider the perspectives of others in order to find common ground.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY ADVANCEMENT NETWORK

The Community Advancement Network (CAN) is a partnership of government, non-profit, private and faith-based organizations who work together to enhance the social, health, educational and economic well-being of Central Texas. CAN provides a unique, collaborative forum to enhance awareness of issues, strengthen partnerships, connect efforts across issue areas, and facilitate development of collaborative strategies.

www.canatx.org

ABOUT iACT

Interfaith Action of Central Texas (iACT) cultivates peace and respect through interfaith dialogue, service and celebration. iACT exists to build healthy relationships between the faith communities of Central Texas. The work of iACT includes facilitating interfaith understanding and civil discourse, helping to provide home repair for seniors and disabled individuals, and teaching English as a Second Language and cultural skills to newly arrived refugees. <http://interfaithtexas.org/>

WHAT IS A DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE?

A Deliberative Dialogue is a process through which community members are able to talk productively about an issue of mutual concern. The goal is to bring more people into the discussion and identify shared areas of interest for action. It is not a debate. It is not about reaching agreement or seeing eye-to-eye. It is about looking for a shared direction driven by what we value the most. Through a Deliberative Dialogue, we examine the benefits and consequences of possible solutions, and find out what we, as a community, can and cannot accept.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF A DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE?

- To better understand the issue and share our individual concerns;
- To listen to each other and consider the benefits and drawbacks of each approach;
- To discuss what business, government and individuals can do to make a difference; and
- To identify shared ideas about what we can do together.

The ideas that emerge from these deliberative dialogues are compiled and shared with the public, the media, and local policymakers. We hope these dialogues lead to further discussions within our community, involving wider circles of people who care about the issue and are willing to work toward a brighter future for everyone in Austin.

For more information about Deliberative Dialogues visit the Nations Issues Forum website:

<https://www.nifi.org/>

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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