

BACKGROUND

In early 2014, the OIM recognized a pattern of interactions between Denver youth and officers that appeared to have escalated due to miscommunication and misunderstanding. While several public and private entities in Denver had taken steps to try to address one or more aspects of this problem, we believed that additional work was needed to build skills in youth and officers that would help to improve their interactions on the street. The OIM thus sought and received a federal Justice Assistance Grant (“JAG”) from the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice to develop and launch the *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops*™ program (“Youth Outreach Project” or “YOP”) in 2014.

As of August 2016, 312 youth and 35 Denver Police Department (DPD) officers have participated in 10 YOP forums. A total of 115 DPD officers have been trained on adolescent brain development and de-escalation techniques with youth, and 11 DPD trainers have been certified to continue training other officers within the DPD. In addition, 62 community members have been equipped to serve as YOP forum facilitators. Participants are surveyed, and the responses of both officers and youth to the training sessions and forums have been extraordinarily positive. These are exciting results, and we look forward to expanding them in the months and years ahead.

Youth and officers are surveyed following YOP trainings and forums.
Feedback to date has been extremely positive.

35 officers participated in forums

100% thought the information provided was useful and the forum was a good use of time.



“... [youth] are often scared when we contact them. I never really looked at it that way.”

115 officers were trained

91% felt better equipped to deal with youth.



89% thought the training was relevant to the work they do.

Feedback from Youth Participants



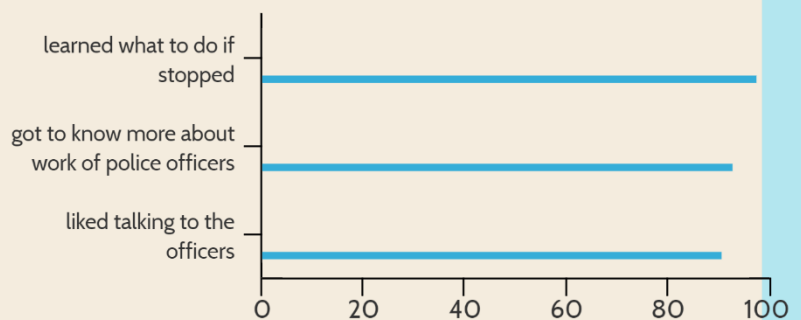
“I learned way more about how to have control when talking to cops.”

4 out of 5

had more trust in the DPD after the forum.



% of youth who reported they:



With the active engagement and participation of the DPD, community members, researchers, and youth, the program was developed in 2014. It was piloted with a limited number of youth and officers in 2015, and is now being delivered more widely in 2016. The program involves training officers on key aspects of adolescent development and de-escalation techniques geared toward youth, and educating youth about their rights and responsibilities when in contact with law enforcement. Officers and youth are then brought together in forums to share their personal experiences of police/youth contacts, discuss their perceptions during those encounters, and develop guidelines to be followed by youth and officers during future contacts.

YOP forums are five hours long, and take place in schools or at community-based program sites. They are broken into five modules:

- 1) **Opening Session:** The forum begins with youth and officers together for a short opening session to establish goals and ground rules for the day, and begin to break the ice. All participants are asked to be open to new ideas, to teaching and learning, and to engaging with each other.
- 2) **Separate Trainings:** Officers and youth are split up into breakout sessions. Youth learn their constitutional rights and their responsibilities during law-enforcement encounters and how to safely exercise those rights, as well as laws that commonly trigger contact with police. They also learn proper police procedures during those contacts, and what to do if those procedures are not followed. Officers receive training on how youth may interpret officer behavior, and skills to de-escalate youth encounters. Depending on the particular forum, officers may also be trained on emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practice, positive youth development, and/or restorative practices. Each group does an exercise on implicit bias in order to enable participants to think about common potential biases that might influence their perceptions and actions during youth/officer encounters.
- 3) **“Breaking Bread”:** Officers and youth convene into small groups for lunch, during which they are encouraged to have informal conversations.

- 4) **Kids and Cops Circles:** In breakout rooms with trained community facilitators, youth are encouraged to share their personal stories about police contacts, and officers are encouraged to discuss their law-enforcement experiences with youth. Officers are also able to relate proper police practices and training, and youth have an opportunity to ask questions. Each small group is then tasked with extracting lessons from these stories to determine whether different decisions by the youth and officers could have improved the interactions. Each group must then develop a set of guidelines that will help de-escalate and improve future youth/officer contacts.
- 5) **Closing Session/Report Back:** The final session brings everyone together again to reflect on what they have learned, identify next steps in improving youth/police relations, and commit to those steps. Each small group gets an opportunity to share their guidelines for youth/officer interactions with the larger group, and then common themes amongst the groups are identified. Finally, officers and youth are asked to complete evaluations of their perspectives after having completed the forum.

The program presented here is discussed in depth in the OIM’s 2016 Semiannual Report, which can be accessed at <http://denvergov.org/oim>.

More information on the YOP can be found at <http://kidsandcops.org/>.

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