Charles E. Shannon Local Action Research Partner Report

Haverhill-Methuen 2009

Evaluation report of the Youth-Police Dialogues:
Results of quantitative data collection

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Introduction

In 2008, the Massachusetts legislature allocated $12.4 million in funding for gang violence prevention through the Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative (CSI). Currently, 17 Massachusetts communities are receiving funding from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (MA-EOPSS) to implement youth/gang violence prevention strategies. Haverhill and Methuen are two of these communities. Throughout 2009, a research team from the Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) has been supporting and evaluating the Haverhill and Methuen CSI-funded youth violence prevention efforts.

One component of the 2009 Haverhill and Methuen CSI Initiative is a three-session series of structured, facilitated community dialogues between Haverhill youth and police. These dialogues were implemented in partnership with the Haverhill Police Department, Haverhill High School staff, and a professional civic engagement agency, Civic Dialogue Services. The BUSPH research team administered quantitative pre- and post-test surveys at the beginning and end of the dialogues. The results of the surveys are summarized in this report.

Description of the Youth-Police Dialogues in Haverhill

The Youth-Police Dialogues of Civic Dialogue Services is a three-session intensive dialogue program designed to reduce animosity and build greater trust among police officers and at-risk young people. The goals of the dialogues are to improve self-esteem and decision-making among youth, reduce illegal and dangerous activities, and increase public safety. Youth-Police Dialogues seeks to achieve these goals by (1) enabling mutually respectful communication between youth and police participants; (2) eliciting negative opinions, resentments and stereotypes that police and youth may have toward each other; (3) deepening understanding and appreciation for each others' backgrounds, challenges and motivations; and (4) brainstorming ideas for improving community-police relations and making their communities safer.

The concept of Youth-Police Dialogues in Massachusetts began in 2004 in response to a sudden increase in deadly violence in Boston neighborhoods, and residents' reports of a lack of trust and reluctance to cooperate with local police. Civic Dialogue Services is a consulting group operated by Jeff Stone, who developed the initial version of the Youth-Police Dialogues initiative as an offshoot of a community diversity dialogue program he directed in Boston. The three-session model has been implemented in several Boston neighborhoods and cities in Eastern Massachusetts. There are typically either two or three co-facilitators of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Each Youth-Police Dialogues series is normally attended by approximately 20 at-risk teenagers, 10 police officers and three to six youth workers or caseworkers. With a total of about 35 people in the room, this is a "large small-group dialogue," maximizing the number of people who can benefit from the experience while still allowing for sufficient interaction time for individual participants.

In Haverhill, the Youth-Police Dialogues were conducted at the Haverhill Public Library conference room on June 8, 15 and 22, 2009, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. All 87 Haverhill police officers were invited to participate in the dialogues, and nine volunteered to attend. Approximately 30 youth were recruited through Haverhill High School Violence Prevention Intervention (VIP) Program staff and local Department of

Youth Services (DYS) staff. The dialogues consisted of three weekly sessions, each approximately three hours in length. The structure of the sessions differed slightly, but each progressed through five components: introduction, activity, dinner, activity, and wrap-up. Major discussion modules included stereotypes, disrespect, gangs, snitching, role of police, options for youth and other concerns that young people and police have about each other.

Session one consisted of naming hopes and fears about the dialogues, hearing from police why they became officers, a round circle discussion about what's working and not working between youth and police, and group work on stereotyping by youth and police toward each other. Sessions two and three built on the content and results of the previous session. Session two focused on gang experiences, personal responsibility to one's community, and snitching as topics of discussion. During session three, participants brainstormed and voted on action steps for police and youth to accomplish together. Facilitators reviewed content from previous sessions and presented certificates of recognition to each participant.

At the end of each session, Civic Dialogue Services facilitators asked participants to fill out a one-page anonymous feedback form. The form allowed the facilitators to assess the organization and quality of participants' dialogue experience and revisit recurrent themes at subsequent sessions. Feedback was included in a summary report provided by the facilitators after each session to organizers.

Methods

Sample

This evaluation used a one-group pre-test and post-test design to compare youth and police attitudes and beliefs about one another, and about community safety in Haverhill, before and after the dialogues. All participants in the youth-police dialogues were invited to complete the surveys, and participation in the study was voluntary. Eight police officers attended the first dialogue session, and all (100%) completed the pre-test survey. Fifteen youth attended the first dialogue session and 12 (80%) completed the pre-test survey. Nine officers attended the final dialogue session, and all (100%) completed the post-test survey. Nineteen youth attended the final dialogue session, and 18 (95%) completed the post-test survey.

Measures

Two pre- and post-test surveys were developed collaboratively by BUSPH research staff and members of the Haverhill-Methuen CSI Steering Committee--one for police and one for youth participants. The police pre- and post-test consisted of 16 original questions and assessed multiple outcomes of interest, including the quality of the relationship between youth and police; perceptions of youth fairness, truthfulness, respect of police and potential for changing; police friendliness, racism, and willingness to work with and mentor youth; community safety, views of the police's role in solving youth violence, and hopes for the future. The youth pre- and post-test consisted of 14 original questions and was also designed to assess youth-police relationship quality and community safety; police fairness, goodness, respect and racial treatment; and youth willingness to be mentored by police. In addition, it assessed youth's perceptions of how well police understand youth, and youth's likelihood of becoming a police officer. Finally, it asked youth about their perceptions of "snitching" – which is a pejorative term for

reporting illegal activity to the police. Questions were answered using four- and five-point Likert scales. The surveys took approximately 10 minutes for participants to complete.

Data collection procedures

Immediately prior to the beginning of the first Haverhill youth-police dialogue session on June 8, 2009, two members of the BUSPH evaluation team (Baughman and Isaacson) obtained informed consent/assent from participants and administered the paper and pencil surveys. Participants completed the surveys at their seats and were instructed to keep their responses private. Surveys were collected by the evaluation team members and the dialogue session began. Similarly, at the end of the third dialogue session on June 22, 2009, the facilitator reintroduced the BUSPH team, who provided consent forms to any new participants, reminded the group of the purpose of the surveys, and distributed surveys to all who consented, regardless of whether they had completed the pre-test survey or participated in previous dialogues. The protocol for this study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Boston University.

Analysis

Data were cleaned, hand-entered into an Excel database, and analyzed using STATA 8.0. Means and proportions were calculated for the pre- and post-tests. Differences in means and proportions were assessed using t-tests, chi-square, and Fisher's exact tests. Differences in means and proportions were not statistically significant, potentially due to the small sample size.

Results

Changes in youth attitudes

Results suggest that youths' attitudes toward police improved during the dialogues (Table 1). For example, from pre-test to post-test, there was a substantial decrease in the proportion of youth who agreed that most police officers are corrupt (58% v. 10%, respectively) (Table 1). Before the dialogue, only one-third (33%) of youth agreed that police understood youth; however, after the dialogues, the proportion increased to 55% (Table 1). In addition, the proportion of youth who reported that police officers "were fair" on the post-test increased by nearly 100% (50% vs. 95%, respectively) (Table 1). Finally, before the youth-police dialogue sessions, youth ranked the quality of relations between the youth and police as a 4 on a scale of 1-10 (1=worst, 10=best). After the third dialogue session, the ranking had increased by 25% to a 5 (Table 1).

Substantial positive changes were also observed in youth admiration and trust of police. For example, at pre-test, only 42% of youth surveyed reported that they would be willing to sit down and talk one-on-one with a police officer, while at post-test, the proportion who reported the same increased to 77% (Table 1). Similarly, before the dialogues, a very small proportion of youth said that they could see themselves becoming a police officer (17%). After the third dialogue session, the proportion of youth who reported that they could see themselves becoming a police officer someday had increased to nearly half (45%) (Table 1). In addition, from pre-test to post-test there

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was a substantial increase in the proportion of youth who reported that if they had a problem, they would go to a police officer for help (8% v. 50%, respectively) (Table 1).

Topics that showed smaller improvements from pre-test to post-test include youth reporting that police officers are respectful (50%v. 67%, respectively), that police officers care about youth (50% v. 66%, respectively), and sharing information with police officers (*i.e.* "snitching") (42% v 61%, respectively) (Table 1). No changes were observed in the proportion of youth reporting that most police officers were good people (75% v. 78%, respectively), or that the police treat youth differently depending on their race (42% v .44%), from before to after the dialogue sessions (Table 1).

Changes in police attitudes

Substantial changes in police attitudes related to respect and fair treatment from youth were observed after the dialogue sessions (Table 2). For example, the proportion of police who agreed that youth respect Haverhill police officers increased from 0% to 33% from pre- to post-test (Table 2). Similarly, the proportion of police who agreed that youth treat Haverhill officers fairly increased from 0% at pre-test to 11% at post-test (Table 2). On the pre-test, the police ranked the relationship with the youth as a 4 on a scale from 1 to 10 (1=worst, 10=best), while on the post-test the ranking had improved by 25% to a 5 (Table 2).

Other police responses did not show substantial change from pre- to post-test. The majority of police agreed on both the pre- and post-test that if a young person told them something about a crime, they would believe him/her (87% and 90%, respectively) (Table 2). A small proportion of police officers reported on the pre-test that youth were "looking for trouble" (12%), and the proportion who reported this on the post-test was virtually unchanged (11%) (Table 2). Finally, most police officers reported on both the pre- and post-test that police activities were not the best way to solve the problem of youth violence (75% v. 67%, respectively) (Table 2).

For some outcomes, there was not much room for improvement from pre- to post-test because responses on the pre-test were already extremely positive. For example, 100% of police officers agreed at pre-test that they care about youth, that youth today face a lot of challenges, and that it is not too late for youth to change (Table 2). In addition, all police officers reported at pre-test that they were willing to talk with youth one-on-one and willing to work with youth to make the community safer (Table 2).

Discussion

Both youth and police appear to have benefited from the dialogues. Youth reported that they were more willing to sit down and talk with a police officer after the dialogue sessions than before. They were also more likely to say that they would go to a police officer if they needed help and that they could see themselves as a police officer in the future. Police officers entered the dialogue sessions with positive feelings about youth, and their beliefs that youth respected them and treated them fairly improved. They did not generally see youth as looking for trouble, and they consistently reported that they were willing to talk with and mentor them. Police also expressed an opinion that suppression was not the most effective solution to youth violence.

There were some attitudes that were unchanged by the dialogues. For example, the same proportion of police reported before and after the dialogues that that they care about youth in Haverhill, they are willing to work with and mentor them, that youth are

"looking for trouble", and that youth face a lot of challenges. There was not much change noted in youths' beliefs about "snitching," police respect, and whether police care about youth. By the end of the dialogues, almost half of youth still believed that police treated people differently based on race. One reason for this might be that in discussions about these topics during the dialogues, youth and police perspectives were observed to be very different and deeply rooted in life experiences. Nine hours of dialogue were enough to improve opinions related to fairness and trust, but not "snitching" or racial treatment by police. Despite some opinions that remained unchanged, the dialogues contributed to specific improvements in youths' attitudes, especially toward becoming a police officer and being willing to be mentored by police.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that the Youth-Police Dialogues improved the relationship, and potential for positive interaction, between youth and police in Haverhill. Both groups reported experiencing high satisfaction with the dialogue sessions and expressed a desire to communicate and work together. Haverhill youth responses indicated an improvement in attitudes toward police fairness and corruption, going to officers for help with a problem, and wanting to become an officer someday. Youth were also slightly more likely to report that they would be willing to share information with police. While little progress was made related to youth perceptions of "snitching" and differential racial treatment by police, Haverhill youth who participated in this series came away with a more positive impression of police.

Police attitudes toward youth were positive even prior to the first dialogue, and they continued to report being willing to talk with and mentor youth. Police perceptions of respect and fair behaviors from youth improved as well. They acknowledged that youth face many challenges and that it is not too late for them to change. Police involved in the dialogue sessions care about the youth in Haverhill and are willing to work with youth to make the community safer and better.

Overall, the results suggest that youth-police dialogue sessions were successful at meeting the goals of the dialogue: (1) enabling mutually respectful communication between youth and police participants; (2) eliciting negative opinions, resentments and stereotypes that police and youth may have toward each other; (3) deepening understanding and appreciation for each others' backgrounds, challenges and motivations; and (4) providing a forum in which participants could brainstorm ideas for improving community-police relations and make their communities safer. Continued positive communication and interaction among youth and police in Haverhill may help maintain attitude improvements fostered by the dialogues.

Table 1. High School Youth Attitudes and Beliefs of Police Officers in Haverhill, MA 2009

Characteristic	Baseline % (n)	Post-test % (n)
Total	100% (12)	100% (18)
Haverhill police officers are fair		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	17% (3)
Agree	50% (6)	78% (14)
Disagree	50% (6)	5% (1)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Haverhill police officers are respectful		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	11% (2)
Agree	50% (6)	56% (10)
Disagree	25% (3)	28% (5)
Strongly Disagree	25% (3)	0% (0)
Missing	--	5% (1)
Haverhill police understand the youth in Haverhill		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	5% (1)
Agree	33% (4)	50% (9)
Disagree	58% (7)	39% (7)
Strongly Disagree	8% (1)	5% (1)
I would be willing to sit down and talk with a police officer one-to-one		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	33% (6)
Agree	42% (5)	44% (8)
Disagree	33% (4)	17% (3)
Strongly Disagree	25% (3)	5% (1)
I can see myself becoming a police officer someday		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	17% (3)
Agree	17% (2)	28% (5)
Disagree	25% (3)	22% (4)
Strongly Disagree	58% (7)	33% (16)
Most police officers are corrupt		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	5% (1)
Agree	58% (7)	5% (1)
Disagree	42% (5)	78% (14)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	11% (2)
If I had a problem, I would go to a police officer for help		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	28% (5)
Agree	8% (1)	22% (4)
Disagree	75% (9)	33% (6)
Strongly Disagree	17% (2)	11% (2)
Missing	---	5% (1)

Table 1 (continued). High School Youth Attitudes and Beliefs of Police Officers in Haverhill, MA 2009

Characteristic	Baseline % (n)	Post-test % (n)
Most police officers care about the youth in Haverhill		
Strongly Agree	8% (1)	5% (1)
Agree	42% (5)	61% (11)
Disagree	25% (3)	22% (4)
Strongly Disagree	25% (3)	5% (1)
Missing	--	5% (1)
Most police officers are good people		
Strongly Agree	8% (1)	22% (4)
Agree	67% (8)	56% (10)
Disagree	17% (2)	11% (2)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	5% (1)
Missing	8% (1)	5% (1)
The police in Haverhill treat youth differently depending on their race		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	42% (5)	44% (8)
Disagree	42% (5)	28% (5)
Strongly Disagree	8% (1)	22% (4)
Missing	8% (1)	5% (1)
It is not snitching to tell the police something that might help someone or prevent someone from getting hurt		
Strongly Agree	17% (2)	28% (5)
Agree	25% (3)	33% (6)
Disagree	42% (5)	22% (4)
Strongly Disagree	8% (1)	11% (2)
Missing	--	5% (1)
How would you rank the quality of relations between youth and police officers in Haverhill? (1= worst, 10= best)		
Mean	4.2	5.1
Median	4.0	5.0
Range	1-8	1-8
How safe do you feel when you are out alone at night in Haverhill?		
Not safe at all	17% (2)	22% (4)
Somewhat safe	25% (3)	39% (7)
Safe	44% (4)	39% (7)
Very safe	17% (2)	0% (0)
Missing	8% (1)	--

Table 2. Haverhill Police Department Officer Attitudes and Beliefs of Local Youth, 2009

Characteristic	Baseline % (n)	Post-test % (n)
Total	100% (8)	100% (9)
Youth in Haverhill respect the police		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	0% (0)	33% (3)
Disagree	100% (8)	67% (6)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Youth in Haverhill treat police officers fairly		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	0% (0)	11% (1)
Disagree	100% (8)	89% (8)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Youth in Haverhill are looking for trouble		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	12% (1)	11% (1)
Disagree	88% (7)	89% (8)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
I care about the youth in Haverhill		
Strongly Agree	37% (3)	44% (4)
Agree	63% (5)	56% (5)
Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Youth in Haverhill today face a lot of challenges		
Strongly Agree	37% (3)	56% (5)
Agree	63% (5)	44% (4)
Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
It's too late for most of these kids to change		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Disagree	88% (7)	78% (7)
Strongly Disagree	12% (1)	22% (2)
Most of the kids I see on the street in Haverhill will never amount to much		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	0% (0)	11% (1)
Disagree	88% (7)	56% (5)
Strongly Disagree	12% (1)	33% (3)
I can't be friendly with youth and be a good police officer		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	11% (1)
Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Disagree	25% (2)	56% (5)
Strongly Disagree	75% (6)	33% (3)

Characteristic	Baseline % (n)	Post-test % (n)
I am willing to sit down and talk with a young person one-on-one		
Strongly Agree	50% (4)	44% (4)
Agree	50% (4)	56% (5)
Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
I am willing to work together with kids to make Haverhill safer		
Strongly Agree	50% (4)	44% (4)
Agree	50% (4)	56% (5)
Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
The problem of youth violence can be best solved by police activities		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	25% (2)	33% (3)
Disagree	75% (6)	67% (6)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
I treat youth differently depending on their race		
Strongly Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Agree	0% (0)	0% (0)
Disagree	50% (4)	44% (4)
Strongly Disagree	50% (4)	56% (5)
If a young person told me something about a crime, I would believe him/her		
Strongly Agree	12% (1)	33% (3)
Agree	75% (6)	67% (6)
Disagree	13% (1)	0% (0)
Strongly Disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)
How would you rank the quality of relations between youth and police officers in Haverhill? (1= worst, 10= best)		
Mean	3.6	5.3
Median	4.0	5.0
Range	2-5	3-7
How safe do you feel when you are out alone at night in Haverhill?		
Not safe at all	0% (0)	0% (0)
Somewhat safe	25% (2)	22% (2)
Safe	50% (4)	67% (6)
Very safe	25% (2)	11% (1)