



U.S. Department of Justice
Community Relations Service (CRS)

Strengthening Police and Community Partnerships Program in Erie, Pennsylvania: A Case Study

2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, the Community Relations Service (CRS) delivered the Strengthening Police and Community Partnerships (SPCP) facilitated dialogue program in Erie, Pennsylvania. Approximately 79 diverse leaders participated in the program, representing local youth, refugees, and representatives of Erie faith groups, law enforcement, social services groups, business and community groups, and civil rights organizations.

Participants identified issues impacting police-community relations and then developed solutions to address each issue. During the program, representatives from each stakeholder group were selected to participate in the Erie SPCP Council, which was tasked with implementing the participants' solutions. The Erie SPCP Council has met once a month since April 2018.

In May 2021, CRS conducted a case study to identify the impacts and outcomes of the Erie SPCP program and Erie SPCP Council on police-community relations. These outcomes and impacts were identified by analyzing data collected from online surveys and during interviews.

FINDINGS

A. Impacts

This executive summary highlights the impacts that most closely align to police-community relations, including perceptions of:

- improved trust between community members and police,
- decreased racial tensions in the community,
- improved relationships between community members and police, and
- increased community capacity.

The tables below summarize the survey responses CRS received from participants in the SPCP program, other invited stakeholders, and members of the SPCP Council. As shown in Table 1, these responses indicate that a greater percentage of those respondents rated community trust in the police and police-community partnerships in Erie as good or very good in 2021 than they did in 2018 before CRS conducted the SPCP program. In addition, a lesser percentage of those respondents rated racial tensions in Erie as high or very high than they would have in 2018. Table 2 summarizes the survey responses CRS received from participants relating to their perceptions of improved community capacity to independently prevent and respond to conflicts and implement actions to strengthen police-community relations in the future.

Table 1: Survey Responses Relating to Perceptions of Racial Tensions, Police-Community Partnerships, and Trust

	2018	2021
% of Participants Rating Perceptions of Community Trust in Police as Good or Very Good in Erie, PA	7.4%	29.6%
% of Participants Rating Racial Tensions as High or Very High in Erie, PA	62.9%	46.1%
% of Participants Rating Perceptions of Police-Community Partnerships as Good or Very Good in Erie, PA	6.7%	37.9%

Table 2: Survey Responses Relating to Perceptions of Improved Community Capacity

% of Participants Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed that City and Police Leadership Have Improved Their Capacity to Prevent and Respond to Conflicts	87.9%
% of Participants Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed That SPCP Council Members Improved Their Strategic Planning and Implementation Skills	90%

B. Outcomes

In addition to the impacts outlined above, the case study evaluated the outcomes of the SPCP program and the SPCP Council’s implementation between May 2018 and May 2021 of actions focused on improving police-community relations. This section includes a summary of those outcomes.

New Policy and Programs

- The Erie Police Department implemented new policies, including requiring body worn cameras for every police officer and increasing foot patrols and patrols of hotspots.
- The Erie Police Department independently facilitated an SPCP-type program with youth in the community focused on youth and police relations.

Education and Community Outreach

- The Erie Police Department and SPCP Council participated in cultural diversity and sensitivity training and implicit bias training.
- The Erie Police Department and City of Erie formed the New Americans Council and the Asian Pacific Islanders Council to improve communication and trust with these communities.
- The Erie Police Department hosted public forums to educate the community and learn about issues impacting the community.

- The Erie Police Department Police officers and SPCP Council members engaged in robust outreach with youth in the community, including arranging for ice cream trucks in underserved neighborhoods, distributing face masks, playing basketball with youth in the Police Athletic League (69 officers participated), conducting dialogues with youth, and participating in other youth-focused activities.

Diversity of the Erie Police Department

- The Erie Police Department hired a full-time recruiter to focus on increasing the diversity of people of color and women in the department.
- The Erie Police Department distributed brochures and cards to different places of worship and community centers to advertise job openings.
- The Erie Police Department reported a 35% increase in the number of applicants in 2020.

Table 3 summarizes the survey responses CRS received relating to perceptions of the services CRS provided to the Erie community. Survey responses indicated that a majority of council members agreed or strongly agreed that CRS provided the council with tools to sustain and implement actions and met the council’s facilitation needs.

Table 3: Survey Responses Relating to Perceptions of CRS Service to Support the SPCP Council

% of Erie SPCP Council Members Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed That CRS Provided the Council with Tools to Sustain the Council and Implement Actions	68.8%
% of Participants Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed That CRS’s Facilitation of the Erie SPCP Council’s Meetings Met the Council’s Needs	82.3%

METHODOLOGY

Surveys

The case study includes data from 34 respondents. CRS distributed 75 online survey invitations to SPCP program participants, invited participants, and current and former council members. Of the online survey invitations sent, CRS received 26 responses: 12 surveys from council members, 10 surveys from program participants, and four surveys from invited participants.

Interviews

CRS conducted eight virtual interviews with Erie SPCP Council members who represented law enforcement and community leadership. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes and trends.