

7-19-2002

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### Recommended Citation

Davis, Karen A., "Teens give insights to police trainees: Teenageres developed a workshop to help the police learn how to Interact more positively with young people" (2002). *Broad Street Studio*. 19.  
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## Teens give insights to police trainees

**Teenagers developed a workshop to help the police learn how to interact more positively with young people.**

07/19/2002

**BY KAREN A. DAVIS**  
**Journal Staff Writer**

PROVIDENCE -- "We've got a report of a disturbance on Willow Street, possible drug dealing . . ." came the mock radio dispatcher's call.

Two officers respond to the "scene," a porch where a group of teens are listening to music, play-fighting and cracking jokes with each other.

Would the young officers respond to the porch ready to pounce on the urban youth, whom they might have already stereotyped as thugs?

Or would they approach the call with the goal of de-escalating the situation, maintaining their pledge to protect and serve?

The scene last week at the Providence Police Training Academy was not real. But the situation was all too familiar to city youths, whose exposure to the police is often under not-so-friendly circumstances.

And so they came to the academy to share their insights and suggestions with about 43 police recruits.

The session -- which included more than 20 teens from Youth In Action, AS220/Broad Street and Providence Youth Student Movement, a new organization of Southeast Asian members -- was designed by youth to help the police develop positive, effective skills in dealing with young people.

The idea for the ground-breaking workshop came about after teens from a half-dozen organizations got together at roundtable sessions to discuss ways to make the city better for teens, said Karen Feldman, executive director of Youth In Action. One way of reaching that goal is to decrease the violence, the teens concluded.

Roundtable participants also agreed that the police should be part of the solution -- because they felt that some officers have been part of the problem.

"Youth don't feel like police are there to protect them," Feldman said. "They feel that they are there to hurt them."

Despite their negative experiences, Feldman said, the teens pushed and cajoled administrators in order to talk with the new recruits because they believe that positive changes can be made by working with young officers.

The teens hope that the July 11 workshop will not be the last time they get the opportunity to conduct the training workshop at the policy academy.

By using role-playing and interactive activities, the teens designed the workshop to illustrate what experiences and concerns the police and teens have in common as well as to challenge assumptions based on their age, neighborhood or skin color.

The first exercise had youths and the police stand in a huge circle. As one teen read from a list of statements, participants were asked to step forward when they heard a statement that applied to them.

"I often feel unsafe when I am walking in the streets of Providence."

"I would feel safer if I had a gun, or if I was walking with someone else who has one."

Both statements prompted many teens to step forward; very few, if any officers, stepped toward the center of the circle.

"I am often followed or watched suspiciously when I go into a store" and "I have been stereotyped because of the way I look or dress" also drew responses from most of the multiracial group of teens.

Many of the male teens stepped forward after hearing the statement, "I have been personally mistreated by a police officer."

The class of recruits -- several of whom were minorities -- and students agreed with some statements describing their backgrounds. Some had grown up in a low-income community, had parents who were born outside the United States, grew up in a single-parent family or been called a negative name because of race, gender or sexual orientation.

Every police recruit and teen agreed with the statement, "I am working towards making Providence a better community."

One police recruit said that the exercise served as a reminder that teens and officers might have different experiences, but they also might share similar backgrounds.

The workshop grew intense at times, as police recruits asked the teens if, when confronted by a police officer, they could respect that the officer is simply trying to do their job.

Chace Baptista, 16, and another teenager both said that respect is a two-way street. Speaking on behalf of all the teens, both said they will have respect for the police who approach them with respect.

One recruit told the teens that the would-be officers know their responsibility: "They teach us here in the academy that when one police officer does something it reflects on us all."

The workshop ended with several teens describing who they are, what they do to make a positive difference in the community and their past experiences.

Two members of PrYSM told of their efforts to work with youth gangs and to stop the deportation of Cambodians. In recent months, the deportations have increased, causing the separation of many local families.

Chace told the cadets that he works with Youth In Action, a five-year-old organization that helps low-income, minority youth to develop programs that strengthen their communities.

At 16, Chace helps oversee the budget of the group, recently signed for the purchase of their new house and sits on a committee that evaluates the group's adult staff.

Yet, Chace told them, "in my house, we weren't taught to have too much respect for police" and "cops only come around when something bad happens."

He told the police that his mother was not around for most of his childhood, his father served jail time and struggles with alcoholism, and his grandfather has long suffered with heart problems. Relatives have had to take on the financial strain of raising him and his siblings in a low-income neighborhood.

If they made assumptions based on statistics and stereotypes, Chace said, the police could wrongly assume that he was on the wrong track.

Even with his childhood memories of "seeing cops beatin' on people," Chace said, he took part in the training session because he believes that this class of new recruits and the teens surrounding them can make change.

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