



# Changing Perceptions and Building Relationships Between Youth & Law Enforcement

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June 2020

## OVERVIEW

Videos capturing police officers in America using extreme, and sometimes fatal, force towards Black people has reminded our country of the pervasive racial disparities in community policing and the criminal justice system overall. In addition to the critical work that must take place to change policy and practices, there is significant work to be done to repair strained relationships between law enforcement and communities. Since 2016, RISE has partnered with professional sports leagues and teams (NBA, NHL, NFL, etc.) to build trust and relationships between law enforcement and youth in the communities they serve. Together, we have created and executed 25 programs in 15 major cities around the country that use sports like basketball, hockey and football to bring together local youth, officers, community organizations and leaders to have productive conversations about diversity, race and perspective taking. These programs, which include both multi-week engagements and single-day workshops, are anchored in RISE's curriculum, which is designed to build leadership and cultural competency skills that minimize bias, change negative perceptions and thus create safer communities for all.





## FINDINGS

RISE found that youth hold a mixture of negative (racist, aggressive, abusive) and positive (protector, serving, caring) perceptions of law enforcement. Similarly, law enforcement hold both negative (troublemakers, confrontational, disrespectful) and positive (future leaders) perceptions of youth. Close social circles (family, friends, word of mouth), traditional and social media, and interactions with police all play an important role in shaping youth and law enforcement's perceptions of one another.

Youth, particularly in communities of color, have few opportunities to positively interact with law enforcement, amplifying the negative experiences shared by family, friends and media. Racial tension and the absence of relationships or trust makes it harder for police to keep racially different communities safe. Fortunately, RISE found that positive interactions with one another can shift youth and law enforcement's perceptions from negative to positive.



**"We're actually interacting with the youth when we're not in uniform. We're not standing and speaking and talking to the youth or talking at the youth. We're in there playing basketball with them. We're in there building trust. We're in there demonstrating teamwork. We're in there having conversations. We're in there talking about life and they're asking us really tough questions and it's making us sit back and say 'woah how can I answer this,' and it's giving me a different perspective on how I can go back to my own division and bring out what I've learned from these kids back here... It changed a lot of perspective both ways."**

*- Officer, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

For organizations seeking to improve law enforcement and community relations and build trust and relationships using programming, RISE recommends the following:

1

## Use Sport as an Incentive

Sports are fun, kids and adults want to play them, and thus, they are the 'carrot' or incentive for participation in other aspects of the program. It is often why participants sign up. Accordingly, player visits, venue access, professional game/practice attendance, athletic gear and equipment, in-game recognition and other exclusive opportunities should be used to enhance the overall experience.

2

## Recognize Sport as a Catalyst

Beyond an opportunity to interact outside of an incident (an arrest, investigation, etc.), team sports force players to trust and rely on one another. "Sweating together" humanizes both youth and officers, reminding participants that the others are people like them. The relationship building that takes place on the court reinforces the messages shared in the classrooms. In RISE programs, 90 minutes of on-court activity typically follows 60 minutes of leadership programming. Using them in conjunction is key.

3

## Tackle Hard Topics Strategically

Participants reported enjoying the opportunity to highlight, discuss and problem solve serious issues with law enforcement and learning about their perspectives. Engagement in the modules facilitates the development of trust and creates a sense of openness between facilitators and youth. Ultimately, we believe that leadership will be derived by increasing awareness around these topics and leveraging the skills that youth already possess.

