

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE COMMUNITY

NOAH SANDERS ADVOCACY



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A Noah Sanders Advocacy Program

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A Note Before You Begin

This book starts from a simple belief: **a community and its police need each other, and right now, in too many places, they don't trust each other.**

That distrust didn't come from nowhere. It was built — incident by incident, year by year, on both sides of the divide. Communities carry real wounds. Officers carry real burdens. Both are true at the same time, and any honest book about this subject has to hold both truths without flinching.

This book is not on one side. It is on the side of the neighborhood — the place where police and residents alike live, work, and raise their kids. It tells the history honestly, explains why trust broke down, shows what actually works (with evidence, not slogans), and gives you a practical playbook: what community members can do, what officers can do, and how to build something better where you live.

A few things about how this book was built:

- **Every statistic is date-labeled.** Trust numbers change. You'll always know when a number comes from.
- **Contested events are reported from public records** — charges, outcomes, current status. Not narratives. Facts.
- **Both perspectives are treated fairly.** Community grievances are documented. The realities of police work are documented. You deserve the whole picture.
- **This is education, not legal advice.** The chapter on your rights during police encounters is general information. For legal help, contact a lawyer or the Georgia Justice Project (gjp.org).

If you're a resident who wants a safer neighborhood, an officer who wants to serve one, a parent, a pastor, a teacher, a city official — this book is for you. The bridge gets built from both sides.

— Noah

How This Book Is Organized

- **Part I: Where We Stand** — the history of policing and police-community relations in America and Georgia.
- **Part II: Why Trust Broke** — an honest accounting: what communities experienced, what officers experienced.
- **Part III: What Actually Works** — evidence-based practices: procedural justice, community policing, co-responder models, review boards, youth engagement.
- **Part IV: The Playbook** — for community members (know your rights, engage constructively), for officers (serve procedurally just policing daily), and dialogue frameworks that bring both sides to the table.
- **Part V: Building It in Your City** — action plans, starting a local dialogue program, measuring trust, resources.

A Short History of Policing in America

To understand where the relationship between law enforcement and the community stands today - and where it can go - you have to know how we got here. This is not a textbook chapter. It is the story of an institution that America has been arguing with, and about, for nearly two hundred years.

Where American Policing Came From

In the colonial era and the early republic, there were no police departments as we know them. Towns relied on night watchmen and constables - volunteers and part-time officers drawn from the English tradition. If something went wrong, the watch raised the alarm and the community responded. It was informal, inconsistent, and deeply tied to whoever held local power.

In the South, a parallel system developed. From the early 1700s through 1865, formalized slave patrols enforced the laws that regulated the conduct of enslaved people, returned escapees, and suppressed insurrection. South Carolina's legislation in the early 1700s is the most cited example. This is a real part of the historical record - but what it means is contested among scholars. Some historians identify the slave patrols as among the first formal police agencies in the United States. Other scholars argue that claim cannot survive close scrutiny, pointing out that modern police departments descended from the English system of night watchmen and constables, through the model that Sir Robert Peel built in London.

This book is not going to settle a debate that historians still argue about. Here is what is fair to say: the patrols existed, their purpose was racial control, and the argument over their place in policing's lineage is real and ongoing. If you are going to talk honestly with your community about policing, you need to know this argument exists - because your neighbors know it exists, and they have picked a side.

The other branch of the story is clearer. In 1829, Sir Robert Peel established the London Metropolitan Police - the first modern, professional, full-time police force. Its principles - prevention of crime, public cooperation, minimal force - crossed the Atlantic and became the template for American departments. Boston created the first American police department in

1838, followed by New York in 1845, and the model spread from there.

Peel's Idea - and What Happened to It

Peel's principles are worth sitting with for a minute, because they describe a vision of policing that America has never fully lived up to - and never fully abandoned, either.

The core of Peel's idea was this: the police are the public and the public are the police. Officers were meant to be citizens in uniform, paid to do full-time what every citizen had a stake in - keeping the peace. Prevention mattered more than punishment. Force was a last resort, used only when persuasion failed. And, most radically, the test of police effectiveness was not the number of arrests but the absence of crime and disorder.

That is a beautiful idea. It is also an idea that collided, in America, with the Political Era. When policing became a jobs program for ward bosses, Peel's principles became wall decorations - nice words in a manual that nobody followed. The principle that police need public cooperation cannot survive in a department that treats the public as an afterthought. The principle of minimal force cannot survive in a department with no training, no standards, and no accountability.

Peel's principles did not disappear, though. They went underground, waiting. They resurfaced in Vollmer's call for a code of ethics. They resurfaced in the Kerner Commission's recommendations. They resurfaced, almost word for word, in the community-policing movement of the 1990s. Every serious reform effort in American policing has been, in one way or another, an attempt to get back to what Peel described in 1829: police as part of the community, not apart from it.

That is worth knowing, because it reframes the whole conversation. The reformers are not inventing something new. They are trying to recover something old - something that was in the blueprint from the beginning and got lost along the way.

The Political Era

From the mid-1800s into the early 1900s, American policing lived in what historians call the Political Era. That name tells you everything: departments were controlled by politicians and ward bosses. Jobs went to whoever the party wanted hired. Corruption was not a scandal - it

was the operating system. Brutality was common. Training was nearly nonexistent.

For Black Americans, this era offered almost nothing. Black officers were rarely hired, and after the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was ruled unconstitutional, Black officers all but disappeared from American policing until the 1950s. For nearly a century, the police in most American cities were an all-white force policing Black communities that had no voice in how they were policed. That fact sits underneath a great deal of what came later. You cannot understand the trust gap without understanding that for generations, the people being policed had no representation inside the institution doing the policing.

The Reform Era and August Vollmer

Around 1909, a reform movement began to take hold, and its central figure was August Vollmer, chief of the Berkeley, California, police department from 1905 to 1932. Vollmer is called the father of modern American policing, and the title is earned. He pushed for officer testing and selection standards. He brought science and technology into police work - radios, car patrols, centralized records, even an early version of the lie detector. He argued that officers should be educated, that they should follow a code of ethics, and that policing should be a profession, not a patronage job.

The reformers won. Departments became centralized, professional, and focused on crime control: rapid response times, random patrol, the 911 system. But the reform model had a blind spot, and it was a big one. The new professional departments treated the community's role as minor - citizens were, at best, bystanders to the real work of crime control, and at worst part of the problem. The police became an insulated, inward-looking institution. Officers answered to the chain of command, not to the neighborhood.

That insulation might have been sustainable in quiet times. The 1960s were not quiet times.

What the Reformers Built - and What They Left Out

It is worth pausing on what Vollmer's reforms actually created, because we still live inside it.

Before Vollmer, an American police officer might be hired because he knew the ward boss, given a badge and a club, and sent into the street with no training whatsoever. After Vollmer, the ideal

officer was selected by testing, trained in a professional academy, guided by a written code of ethics, dispatched by radio, patrolling by car, and supported by centralized records. That was a genuine revolution. It made policing more competent, more consistent, and less openly corrupt. Nobody serious wants to go back to the Political Era.

But consider what the reform model optimized for: speed, control, and internal discipline. The measure of a good department became how fast it responded to calls, how many arrests it made, how clean its chain of command was. The community did not appear in those metrics. A department could be excellent by every professional standard of the Reform Era and still be a stranger to the neighborhoods it patrolled - still be feared rather than trusted, still be an occupying presence rather than a partner.

This is the paradox at the heart of modern policing. The reforms that made police professional also made them distant. The car that Vollmer put the officer into - the patrol car, the symbol of modern policing - also took the officer off the sidewalk and behind glass. The radio that connected the officer to headquarters disconnected him from the corner. The centralized command that ended ward-boss corruption also ended the neighborhood's informal influence over how it was policed.

None of this was malicious. The reformers were trying to fix real problems, and they fixed many of them. But they built an institution designed to control crime, not to build relationships - and then were surprised, decade after decade, when the relationships were not there.

That is the context for what happened in the 1960s. When unrest swept American cities, the police responded the way their institution had trained them to respond: as a paramilitary force restoring order. And communities that had no voice in how they were policed, no representation inside the departments, and no channel for their grievances responded the way powerless people respond: in the streets. The Kerner Commission looked at all of it and essentially said: the model is the problem.

The 1960s Unrest and the Kerner Commission

In the summer of 1967, more than 150 American cities erupted in riots and civil disorders. Newark and Detroit burned. Dozens died. President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had signed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, needed to know why the country was coming apart -

so in July 1967, by Executive Order 11365, he created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. It was chaired by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner Jr., had eleven members, and became known as the Kerner Commission.

On March 1, 1968, the commission released its 426-page report. Its central finding is one of the most quoted sentences in American public life: the nation was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal.” The report placed the blame where its authors believed it belonged - on the social consequences of white racism, expressed through disparities in housing, employment, education, and policing.

The commission’s recommendations on policing were specific and far-reaching. It called for better channels for citizens to file grievances about police misconduct. It urged departments to recruit and promote more Black officers - and even proposed a junior “Community Service Officer” corps to draw Black men ages seventeen to twenty-one into police work. It called for an end to “abrasive” patrol practices in Black neighborhoods. It recommended fair standards for handling citizen complaints, programs to build community support for law enforcement, better training for riot response, methods for controlling rumors during unrest, alternatives to lethal weapons, community-based police review boards, and a warning against the militarization of police - in the commission’s words, weapons designed to destroy, not to control, had no place in densely populated urban communities.

Read that list again. Grievance channels. Black officer recruitment. Review boards. De-militarization. De-escalation before the word existed. It is, in large part, the same reform agenda being debated today.

And here is the part that stings: President Johnson, the man who created the commission, never publicly endorsed its report. The findings were filed, the moment passed, and the country moved on to other crises. The Smithsonian would later call it the report that got it right while nobody listened.

The 1960s did not end with a solution. They ended with a diagnosis that was never treated.

It is worth asking why. Part of the answer is politics - Johnson was consumed by Vietnam, and the report’s blunt language about white racism was not what a president fighting for his political life wanted to amplify. Part of the answer is institutional: the recommendations asked police departments to surrender power - to review boards, to grievance processes, to community oversight - and institutions rarely volunteer to be constrained. And part of the answer is that the

country told itself the unrest was over, mistaking quiet for healing. The commission had warned that the nation was moving toward two societies, separate and unequal. The nation read the warning, nodded, and kept moving.

The Community-Policing Movement and the COPS Office

By the 1980s and early 1990s, a new idea was gaining ground: maybe the problem was not just bad officers or bad policies, but the model itself. Maybe police could not control crime from behind a windshield, responding to 911 calls after the damage was done. Maybe they needed to be part of the neighborhood - not above it, not apart from it, but in it.

That idea became community policing. And in 1994, with the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, the federal government created the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services - the COPS Office - inside the Department of Justice, to fund and spread the model nationwide.

The COPS Office defined community policing around three pillars, and they are worth knowing by name, because they are still the standard:

Community Partnerships - collaborative partnerships between the police agency and the people and organizations it serves, built to develop solutions together and increase trust.

Problem Solving - the systematic use of problem-solving to proactively address the conditions that give rise to public-safety problems, instead of just reacting to incidents.

Organizational Transformation - aligning the department's management, structure, personnel, and information systems to support partnerships and proactive problem-solving, not just rapid response.

Read those three pillars and you can see the ghost of the Kerner Commission in them - the same insistence that policing cannot work without the community's trust and participation.

What do the pillars look like in practice? Community Partnerships means officers who know the neighborhood's pastors, business owners, and block captains by name - and residents who know their beat officers the same way. Problem Solving means asking why a particular corner keeps generating calls instead of just answering them, and working with the community on the underlying conditions. Organizational Transformation means promoting and rewarding officers

for relationship-building, not just arrests - because what a department measures is what its officers do.

None of this is soft. It is harder than traditional policing, not easier. It asks officers to be problem-solvers and diplomats as well as enforcers. But it is also the only model that has ever consistently produced what every community says it wants: safety and trust at the same time.

The Eras at a Glance

It helps to see the whole arc in one place:

- **The Watch (colonial era-1830s):** Night watchmen, constables, community responsibility. Informal and inconsistent.
- **The Slave Patrols (1700s-1865, South):** Formalized patrols enforcing racial control. Their place in policing's lineage is debated by scholars; their existence and purpose are not.
- **The London Model (1829):** Peel's Metropolitan Police - professional, full-time, prevention-focused, built on public cooperation.
- **The Political Era (mid-1800s-early 1900s):** Departments captured by politicians and ward bosses. Corruption, brutality, patronage hiring. Black officers nearly absent until the 1950s.
- **The Reform Era (1909 onward):** Vollmer professionalizes policing - testing, science, ethics, technology. But the model insulates police from the community and treats citizens as bystanders.
- **The 1960s:** Urban unrest exposes the gulf between police and citizens. The Kerner Commission diagnoses the disease; the prescription goes unfilled.
- **The Community-Policing Era (1990s-present):** The COPS Office and the three pillars - partnerships, problem-solving, organizational transformation. Peel's idea, returning.

Every era solved the previous era's problem and created the next era's. The Political Era's corruption was answered by the Reform Era's professionalism - which created insulation, which the 1960s exposed, which community policing tries to heal. Understanding this pattern matters, because it tells you that today's arguments are not new. They are the latest round of a two-hundred-year conversation about the same question.

Why This History Matters

Here is the honest summary: American policing was born in a political machine, professionalized into an insulated institution, confronted by the unrest of the 1960s, diagnosed by a commission whose advice was ignored, and then partially reimagined around community partnership in the 1990s. At every stage, the same question has followed it: who do the police serve, and who gets a say in how they serve?

There is one more thing this history teaches, and it is the most important thing for this book. Notice how many times the answer has been the same. Peel said it in 1829: the police are the public. Vollmer said it in his own way: policing must be a profession worthy of public trust. The Kerner Commission said it in 1968: without community partnership, policing fails. The COPS Office said it in 1994: partnerships, problem-solving, transformation.

Two hundred years, and the prescription has not changed. That is either discouraging - we keep having to relearn the same lesson - or encouraging, depending on how you look at it. Here is the encouraging version: the lesson keeps surviving because it is true. Policing works when the community is part of it. It fails when the community is shut out. Everything else is details.

That question - who do the police serve, and who gets a say - is not abstract. In Georgia - in Atlanta, in Savannah, in Macon, in every county in this state - it has names and dates attached to it. The next chapter is Georgia's story. It is the history your readers lived through, and it is where the national story gets personal.

Georgia's Story: Atlanta and Beyond

The national history tells you how American policing works. Georgia's history tells you how it feels.

If you live in Atlanta, you did not learn about police-community relations from a textbook. You learned it from the evening news, from your block, from your family. The cases in this chapter are the ones Noah's readers lived through. They are presented here from the public record - what was charged, what was decided, what stands today. No editorializing. Just the facts, because the facts are enough.

The City Too Busy to Hate

Atlanta has always told a story about itself. "The City Too Busy to Hate" - the slogan dates to the civil rights era, when Atlanta's white business leadership chose negotiation over the violent resistance seen in Birmingham and Selma. It was, by the standards of the Deep South, a genuine achievement. Atlanta desegregated its schools with less violence than almost any major Southern city. It elected Maynard Jackson, its first Black mayor, in 1973. It built a Black political and business class that became the envy of the nation.

But a slogan is not a reality. It is an aspiration, and aspirations get tested. In Atlanta, the test came in the form of dead children in the late 1970s, a dead ninety-two-year-old woman in 2006, a burning Wendy's in 2020, and a young jogger chased down in Brunswick the same year. Each of these cases forced the city to ask whether it was living up to its own story - and each left an answer that satisfied no one completely.

This chapter is about those tests. Not because Atlanta is uniquely broken - every American city has versions of these stories - but because Atlanta is where Noah's readers live, and you cannot build a relationship on a foundation you refuse to look at.

The Atlanta Child Murders: 1979-1981

Between July 1979 and 1981, at least twenty-eight to thirty children, teenagers, and young adults - overwhelmingly African American, mostly boys between nine and fourteen, from low-income Atlanta neighborhoods - were abducted and murdered. Their bodies were found in wooded areas and rivers around the city. The first victims discovered were fourteen-year-old Edward Hope Smith and thirteen-year-old Alfred Evans, in July 1979.

Atlanta in those years was a city holding its breath. Parents restricted their children's movements. The city imposed a curfew for children under sixteen. Camille Bell, the mother of one of the victims, founded the Committee to Stop the Children's Murders and publicly challenged the Atlanta Police Department's handling of the case. Many residents, unconvinced the police were doing enough, formed their own street patrols. A full task force was not assembled until 1980 - after the seventh victim.

On May 22, 1981, officers staking out the Chattahoochee River bridges heard a splash in the early morning hours and stopped a car driven by twenty-three-year-old Wayne Williams. Two days later, the body of twenty-seven-year-old Nathaniel Cater was recovered from the river. Williams was arrested on June 21, 1981. In February 1982, he was convicted of the murders of Cater and twenty-one-year-old Jimmy Ray Payne and sentenced to two consecutive life terms.

Here is what the public record also says: Williams was never formally charged with the child murders, though authorities attributed most of them to him. He maintains his innocence to this day. In 2019, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms ordered the cases reopened so modern investigative technology could be applied to the evidence.

The murders strained race relations in Atlanta and eroded trust in law enforcement - in a city that had branded itself "The City Too Busy to Hate." For Black Atlantans, the message of those years was hard to shake: when our children were dying, the response came late, and the resolution left questions that have never fully been answered. That wound is part of the foundation of police-community relations in this city. You cannot talk about trust in Atlanta without acknowledging it.

Kathryn Johnston: November 21, 2006

On the evening of November 21, 2006, three plainclothes Atlanta narcotics officers executed a no-knock search warrant at the home of ninety-two-year-old Kathryn Johnston on Neal Street in

northwest Atlanta. She had lived in that house for seventeen years. The warrant was based on false information - officers had fabricated the claim that drugs were being sold from the home.

Hearing intruders break in, Johnston fired one shot from an old pistol. The officers answered with thirty-nine shots. Five or six struck her. One was fatal. She died at the scene. No drugs were found in the house.

What followed was worse than the shooting. The officers planted three bags of marijuana - seized in a separate raid earlier that day - in Johnston's basement, to make it look like the warrant had been justified. One officer filed a false incident report. The officers pressured an informant to falsely claim he had made the drug buy described in the warrant affidavit. They met afterward to fabricate a consistent story for homicide investigators.

The cover-up unraveled. In February 2009, in federal court before U.S. District Judge Julie Carnes, three former officers were sentenced for conspiring to violate Johnston's civil rights: Jason Smith received ten years, Gregg Junnier received six years (reduced for his cooperation), and Arthur Tesler received five years. They were also ordered to split \$8,180 to reimburse Johnston's estate for her funeral and burial expenses. A fourth man, Sergeant Wilbert Stallings - the supervisor over the narcotics team - pleaded guilty in a separate case involving a warrantless break-in and was sentenced to eighteen months in federal prison.

In August 2010, the Atlanta City Council approved a \$4.9 million settlement to Johnston's estate, under Mayor Kasim Reed.

The reforms that followed were real and documented. Police Chief Richard Pennington dismantled the eight-man narcotics team entirely and rebuilt it with different officers, later expanding it to thirty. The department tightened its warrant requirements, reviewed its use of confidential informants, and added new regulations including officer drug testing. U.S. Attorney David Nahmias said the case had led the department to implement, in his words, useful reforms in training and supervision and to entirely revamp its Narcotics Unit. The Georgia State Senate voted to make no-knock warrants harder to obtain.

(A note on the name: some federal documents spell her name "Kathryn Johnson." Atlanta sources - and her family - consistently use Kathryn Johnston.)

The Johnston case did something to Atlanta that statistics cannot capture. A ninety-two-year-old woman, in her own home, killed on the basis of a lie, and then lied about after her death. For a

generation of Atlantans, this is the case that made distrust feel not just understandable but rational. It is also the case that created the city's civilian oversight system - the Atlanta Citizen Review Board, established in 2007, exists in large part because of Kathryn Johnston. We will come back to the Review Board later in this chapter.

Rayshard Brooks: June 12, 2020

On the night of June 12, 2020 - in the middle of the national upheaval following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis - Atlanta officers Garrett Rolfe and Devin Brosnan responded to complaints about a man sleeping in his car in a Wendy's drive-thru on University Avenue. Rolfe had been with the department since 2013, working DUI-enforcement units; Brosnan since 2018.

What the body-camera footage shows is this: the officers spoke with twenty-seven-year-old Rayshard Brooks calmly for roughly forty minutes. After a failed field sobriety test, they moved to handcuff him. Brooks resisted, seized Brosnan's Taser, and ran. As he fled, Brooks turned, pointed the Taser at Rolfe, and fired it. Rolfe fired three shots. Brooks died at the hospital.

The aftermath was immediate and explosive. Rolfe was fired the next day. Brosnan was placed on administrative leave. Police Chief Erika Shields resigned. Protesters set the Wendy's on fire. Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms said publicly that she did not believe the shooting was a justified use of deadly force.

On June 17, 2020, Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard announced eleven charges against Rolfe - including felony murder, aggravated assault, violations of his oath of office, and criminal damage to property. Brosnan faced lesser charges of aggravated assault and oath violation.

Then the case took turns that left both sides unsatisfied. On May 5, 2021, the Atlanta Civil Service Board reinstated Rolfe with back pay - not because it ruled on whether he violated department policy, but because it found the city had failed to follow its own disciplinary code and had denied him due process. On August 23, 2022, special prosecutor Peter Skandalakis announced that all charges against both officers would be dropped, finding that "the use of deadly force was objectively reasonable" and that the officers "did not act with criminal intent."

In November 2022, the Atlanta City Council voted 15-0 to approve a \$1 million settlement of the Brooks family's wrongful-death lawsuit.

So here is where the public record leaves it: the officer was fired, then reinstated. The chief resigned. Eleven charges were filed, then all dismissed. The city paid a million dollars. And the community was left to decide for itself what justice looked like - which is why this case, more than almost any other in recent Atlanta history, shows how the same set of facts can produce two completely different stories depending on where you stand. This book will not tell you which story is right. It will tell you that both stories exist, and that any bridge between police and community in Atlanta has to be built across that divide.

Ahmaud Arbery: February 23, 2020

On February 23, 2020, twenty-five-year-old Ahmaud Arbery was chased through the Satilla Shores subdivision near Brunswick, Georgia, by three men in pickup trucks: sixty-five-year-old Gregory McMichael, his thirty-five-year-old son Travis McMichael, and fifty-two-year-old neighbor William “Roddie” Bryan Jr., who recorded the pursuit on video. Travis McMichael shot Arbery dead in the street.

The men who killed Ahmaud Arbery were private citizens, not police officers. This case belongs in this chapter anyway - because of what happened after the killing. For more than two months, no arrests were made. The local district attorney’s office declined to act; Gregory McMichael had previously worked as an investigator in that office. It was only after Bryan’s video became public in May 2020 that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation took over the case and arrests followed.

On November 24, 2021, a Glynn County jury convicted all three men of felony murder, aggravated assault, false imprisonment, and criminal attempt to commit false imprisonment; Travis McMichael was additionally convicted of malice murder. On January 7, 2022, the McMichaels were sentenced to life without parole plus twenty years; Bryan received life with the possibility of parole after thirty years. On February 22, 2022, all three were also convicted in federal court of hate crimes - attempted kidnapping and interference with Arbery’s rights - with the McMichaels additionally convicted of using firearms during a crime of violence.

The case changed Georgia law. In June 2020, Governor Brian Kemp signed the state’s first hate-crimes law, providing enhanced sentencing for crimes motivated by race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, or disability. On May 10, 2021, Kemp signed the repeal of Georgia’s Civil War-era citizen’s-arrest statute - the law the McMichaels had invoked to justify chasing Arbery - replacing it with a narrowly limited private-arrest authority. In 2022, the legislature designated

February 23 as Ahmaud Arbery Day.

There was also prosecutorial accountability, of a kind. Former Brunswick District Attorney Jackie Johnson was indicted in September 2021 on charges of showing favor to Gregory McMichael and obstructing law enforcement by directing that Travis McMichael not be arrested. Those charges were dismissed in February 2025.

For Black Georgians, the Arbery case raised a question that goes to the heart of police-community relations: if the system could not be trusted to arrest three men after a killing was caught on video, what could it be trusted to do? The legal reforms that followed - a hate-crimes law, the end of citizen's arrest - were real. Whether they repaired the trust is a question this book leaves to the reader.

The Atlanta Citizen Review Board

The Review Board was established by city ordinance in 2007, in the wake of the Kathryn Johnston killing. It is an independent city agency - not part of the police department - that provides citizen oversight of misconduct allegations against sworn Atlanta police officers and Department of Corrections members.

Its structure and powers, verified from the board's own fact sheet: a board of citizen members with its own professional staff, including investigators. It handles fourteen categories of complaints - abusive language, false arrest, false imprisonment, harassment, excessive force, serious bodily injury, death caused by an officer, discrimination, abuse of authority, retaliation, failure to provide identification, and violations of standard operating procedures, among others. It accepts anonymous complaints, and it can review serious-bodily-injury and death cases on its own, without a signed complaint. It can investigate, hold public hearings, mediate, issue public reports - and since May 2010, it has subpoena power, with full access to department personnel, documents, and records.

Here is the key nuance, and it matters: the board is advisory on discipline. It can investigate thoroughly, recommend discipline against individual officers, and recommend policy changes - but it does not itself impose punishment. The police chief makes the final disciplinary decision.

In 2020, the City Council expanded the board's duties to require independent review of every case in which police allegedly used deadly force. But in 2025, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution

investigation found that the board had not opened a single investigation of a police shooting or in-custody death between 2020 and 2024 - because, the board said, the police department never notified it that cases were ready for review. The resulting 2025 agreement requires the department to notify the board within twenty-four hours when deadly-force cases are closed by internal affairs or cleared by the district attorney's office, and the requirement was written into the department's manual.

The Review Board's story is, in miniature, the story of civilian oversight everywhere: a real institution with real powers, real limitations, and a constant struggle to make the promise match the practice. Knowing exactly what it can and cannot do is the difference between informed engagement and false hope.

APD Reforms Since 2020

Whatever one thinks of the cases above, the Atlanta Police Department did change after 2020 - and the changes are documented in city records.

In 2020, Mayor Bottoms issued two administrative orders: AO 2020-18, covering use-of-force and de-escalation reforms, and AO 2020-28, issued that November, adopting reforms to improve officer compliance with body-worn camera rules. The department revised its use-of-force continuum on the recommendation of the Mayor's Use of Force Advisory Council, adding specificity and aligning with national best practices. Background checks for new hires were made more exhaustive - including complaint records from other agencies and social-media review - and the department added mental-health and implicit-bias screenings, alongside an expansion of its Pre-Arrest Diversion program.

On the data side, the department built a new Axon-based use-of-force reporting and data-collection system that went live on January 1, 2021. Under the new system, the Training Section reviews the incident report, the supplement, and the body-camera video for every single use of force.

On training, the department required ICAT - the Police Executive Research Forum's de-escalation program - for its officers and folded it into annual in-service training. By the end of October 2021, most of the department had been trained in use of force, de-escalation, and ICAT.

On cameras, the department expanded its body-worn camera policy so that, in essence, anyone doing enforcement work daily must wear one - roughly 1,200 cameras were issued, covering about two-thirds of the force at the time. In a striking move, the department also pulled its officers from federal task forces with the FBI, the DEA, and the U.S. Marshals Service, because those agencies would not permit the cameras. That decision was driven in part by the January 2019 shooting of Jimmy Atchison by an Atlanta officer serving on an FBI task force who was not wearing a camera; no gun was recovered at the scene.

Other 2021 commitments included hiring 250 new officers, expanding the Operation Shield camera network, opening two new At-Promise Centers for youth, and extending Pre-Arrest Diversion across additional police zones.

What Atlanta's Story Teaches

Step back and look at the arc. A city's children murdered while the response lagged. A ninety-two-year-old woman killed in her home on a lie, and the lie compounded after her death. A traffic-stop-turned-shooting that split the city into two irreconcilable narratives. A young man chased down and killed while the system looked away for two months. And alongside all of it: a civilian review board with real powers and real limits, and a police department that - by the documented record - undertook serious reforms.

None of this is ancient history. The Johnston settlement was 2010. The Brooks charges were dismissed in 2022. The Arbery convictions were 2021. The Review Board notification agreement was 2025. This is living memory. When this book talks about building relationships between law enforcement and the community, it is talking about relationships in a city where these things happened - not in theory, but on Neal Street, on University Avenue, in Satilla Shores.

The next chapter looks at the numbers: how much trust exists, where the gaps are, and what the data actually says. Because feelings run deep in this conversation, and the numbers are the one thing both sides can look at together.

The Trust Gap, By the Numbers

Feelings run deep in the conversation about police and community. That is exactly why the numbers matter - they are the one thing both sides can look at together. This chapter lays out what the country's best polling actually says about trust in law enforcement: where it stands, where it has been, where the gaps are, and what the numbers do and do not mean.

One note up front, stated plainly: no Georgia-specific polling on trust in police was found in the research for this book. The figures below are national. They are the best available picture, and they apply to Georgia as much as to anywhere else - but a Georgia poll, if one existed, might tell a more local story. When you see national numbers cited in this book, that is why.

Confidence in Police as an Institution

Every year, Gallup asks Americans how much confidence they have in seventeen major institutions - the military, the presidency, Congress, the police, and others. The police question measures confidence in "the police" as an institution, not in any individual officer.

In 2024, fifty-one percent of American adults said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police - twenty-five percent a great deal, twenty-six percent quite a lot. That was up eight points from 2023, and it was the largest year-over-year change of any of the seventeen institutions Gallup measured. Trust went up, and it went up more for police than for anything else on the list.

Context matters. The record low was forty-three percent, in 2023 - the year before the rebound. The record high was sixty-four percent, in 2004. In 2020, the year of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis police custody and the protests that followed, confidence stood at forty-eight percent.

Then came 2025. Gallup's June 2025 survey put confidence at forty-five percent - down six points from the 2024 rebound. And the racial breakdown of that forty-five percent is where the story gets serious: fifty-two percent of White adults expressed confidence, compared to twenty-four percent of Black adults and thirty-five percent of Hispanic adults. The overall number had recovered somewhat from its lows. The racial gap had not.

What do these numbers mean? They mean that confidence in policing as an institution is volatile - it moves with events, it fell hard, it partially recovered, and it fell again. And they mean that “the public’s” confidence is really two or three different publics experiencing the same institution in very different ways. A fifty-two percent confidence level and a twenty-four percent confidence level are not a disagreement about the same police department. They are two different lived realities.

What do the numbers not mean? They do not mean that forty-five percent of Americans “support the police” and fifty-five percent do not. Confidence in an institution is a specific, narrow thing - it is not approval of every officer, every policy, or every outcome. And national numbers smooth over enormous local variation. The police department in your city is not “the police” in a Gallup questionnaire. Keep that distinction in mind, because the next set of numbers depends on it.

A Different Question: The Officers Themselves

Gallup asks a separate question about the honesty and ethical standards of police officers as people - not the institution, but the men and women doing the job. In January 2025, forty-four percent of Americans rated officers’ honesty and ethics as “high” or “very high.” That was down from forty-five percent in 2023, and Gallup noted that after officers earned majority trust on this measure in 2020 and 2021, the rating had slipped.

Do not conflate the two questions. The fifty-one percent (2024) and forty-five percent (2025) figures measure confidence in the police as an institution. The forty-four percent figure measures how Americans rate officers personally. They move differently, and they mean different things. Someone can distrust the institution while respecting the officer on their block - and many Americans do exactly that.

The Local Gap: Your Police vs. “The Police”

Here is the most important finding in this chapter. When Gallup’s Center on Black Voices asked Americans in 2024 about their local police - the department in their own community, not “the police” in the abstract - seventy-four percent expressed confidence. That was up from seventy-one percent in 2023.

Seventy-four percent confidence in local police. Forty-five percent confidence in police as an institution. That gap - roughly thirty points - is the single most hopeful number in American policing. It says that when people think about the officers they actually encounter, the department that actually patrols their streets, their assessment is dramatically more positive than when they think about policing as a national abstraction shaped by the worst video of the month.

The racial breakdowns of the local numbers tell a more nuanced story - one of real gaps, but also of real movement:

- Black adults' confidence in their local police rose from fifty-nine percent in 2021 to sixty-four percent in 2024 - up six points in a single year, the highest level in four years of measurement. (It had been as low as fifty-five percent in 2022.)
- White adults' confidence in local police stood at seventy-seven percent in the 2024 data, down slightly from eighty percent in 2021.

So the racial gap in local confidence narrowed: Black confidence rising, White confidence easing down. That is movement in the right direction, even if the distance remaining is still large.

The same 2024 data showed seventy-six percent of all adults satisfied with police-community relations in their area, up from seventy-four percent in 2023. On fairness - whether local police treat people like them fairly - sixty-seven percent of Black adults said yes in 2024, up four points from 2023 and nine points from 2022. That compares to eighty-five percent of all adults and ninety percent of White adults. And on the expectation of being treated with courtesy and respect: seventy-five percent of Black adults in 2024, up from sixty-nine percent in 2021 - versus eighty-seven percent of all adults and ninety-one percent of White adults.

Read those trend lines together and a picture emerges: the relationship between Black communities and their local police, while still marked by a wide gap, has been improving on Gallup's measures since the early 2020s. That improvement is fragile, it is incomplete, and it coexists with the institutional confidence numbers that remain low. But it is real, it is measured, and it matters - because it suggests that trust is not fixed. It responds to what departments actually do.

The Racial Divide in Perceptions of Force

The Pew Research Center has measured something different: not confidence, but perceptions of how police do their jobs - particularly around the use of force.

In 2016, Pew surveyed more than 4,500 American adults and found a chasm. Thirty-three percent of Black adults said their local police do an excellent or good job using the right amount of force for each situation - compared to seventy-five percent of White adults. On treating racial and ethnic groups equally: thirty-five percent of Black adults said excellent or good, versus seventy-five percent of White adults. On holding officers accountable when misconduct occurs: roughly one-third of Black adults versus roughly three-quarters of White adults.

Those are not small gaps. They are forty-point gaps, on the most basic questions a community can ask about its police: do they use force appropriately, do they treat everyone the same, and are they held accountable when they do not.

Pew went back in June 2020, in the weeks after George Floyd's murder, and found that assessments had fallen across the board. Since 2016, the share of Americans saying police do an excellent or good job using the right amount of force had dropped from forty-five percent to thirty-five percent - a double-digit decline. Treating racial and ethnic groups equally fell from forty-seven percent to thirty-four percent. Holding officers accountable fell from forty-four percent to thirty-one percent. The declines were comparable among Black and White adults - meaning White Americans' assessments fell too, narrowing some gaps not because Black assessments improved but because everyone's got worse.

The same 2020 survey found eighty-six percent of Black adults favored giving citizens the power to sue police officers for misconduct, compared to sixty percent of White adults - a measure of how differently the two communities view the accountability question.

How to Read a Poll (and How Not To)

Before we go further, a short guide to reading numbers like these - because polls get misused in this conversation constantly, by all sides.

First, **the question shapes the answer**. "How much confidence do you have in the police?" is not the same question as "How would you rate the honesty of police officers?" and it is not the same question as "How much confidence do you have in your local police?" Gallup asks all three, and they produce three different numbers - forty-five percent, forty-four percent, and

seventy-four percent in the most recent readings. Anyone who quotes one of those numbers as “what Americans think about police” without saying which question was asked is either confused or selling something.

Second, **national numbers are averages that hide the spread**. Forty-five percent institutional confidence is the average of fifty-two percent among White adults, twenty-four percent among Black adults, and thirty-five percent among Hispanic adults. The average describes no one. When you hear a national number, always ask: whose number is it?

Third, **timing is everything**. Gallup’s confidence survey is conducted once a year, usually in the summer. A poll taken in June 2020 - weeks after George Floyd’s murder - captures a different country than a poll taken in June 2024. The numbers move with events. That does not make them meaningless; it makes them a record of how events land.

Fourth, **a poll measures a moment, not a verdict**. Forty-three percent in 2023 was the record low. Fifty-one percent in 2024 was a rebound. Forty-five percent in 2025 was a slide. None of those numbers was the final word. They were snapshots of a relationship in motion - which is exactly what a relationship is.

Keep these four rules in mind and the numbers become a tool instead of a weapon.

What Moves the Numbers

Look at the institutional confidence trend line again: forty-eight percent in 2020, forty-three in 2023, fifty-one in 2024, forty-five in 2025. What was happening in the country at each of those points?

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody set off the largest protest movement in American history. Confidence in police fell to forty-eight percent - not the record low, but a sharp drop that reflected a national reckoning.

By 2023, confidence hit its record low of forty-three percent. The country had lived through three years of intense, unresolved argument about policing - about reform, about funding, about what the protests had and had not changed. The debate itself seemed to erode trust on all sides: those who wanted reform saw too little of it, and those who backed the police felt the institution was under attack.

Then 2024 brought the largest single-year increase Gallup had ever recorded for police confidence - up eight points to fifty-one percent, the biggest jump of any institution measured. Something shifted. What exactly is harder to say from the numbers alone, and honest analysts are careful about assigning a single cause. But the direction was unmistakable: the free fall had stopped, and trust was rebuilding.

In 2025, confidence eased back to forty-five percent - a reminder that the rebuilding is fragile.

Now, a word of caution: it is tempting to draw straight lines from events to numbers - this video caused that drop, that policy caused this rebound. Real life is messier. Polls capture the net effect of everything happening at once: crime rates, media coverage, local incidents, political rhetoric, personal experience. No single event explains a national number.

But the broad pattern is hard to argue with: trust in policing falls when the country watches policing fail, and it recovers - slowly, partially - when the crisis passes. That pattern contains both a warning and an opportunity. The warning: trust is easy to destroy and hard to rebuild. The opportunity: it can be rebuilt. The 2024 rebound proves it. The question is whether the rebuilding continues or stalls - and that depends, in large part, on what departments and communities do next. Which is what the rest of this book is about.

What's Missing: The Georgia Gap

There is one more thing the numbers reveal, and it is a gap in the numbers themselves: no Georgia-specific polling on trust in police was found in the research for this book. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's polling covers elections, not police confidence. Everything in this chapter is national data applied to a Georgia audience.

That matters. Georgia is not the nation in miniature. Atlanta's relationship with its police was shaped by the child murders, by Kathryn Johnston, by Rayshard Brooks - events that do not show up in a national average. Savannah, Macon, Columbus, and Albany each have their own histories. A statewide or city-level trust poll would tell Georgia's leaders things the national numbers cannot: which departments are trusted and which are not, where the gaps are widest, whether reforms are working.

The absence of that data is itself a finding. You cannot manage what you do not measure. If Georgia's cities want to build trust between law enforcement and the community, regular, public,

local polling on police-community relations would be a place to start. The Gallup and Pew numbers give us the national weather. Georgia needs its own thermometer.

Until that data exists, Georgia's leaders and advocates are left to work from national figures and local knowledge - from the numbers in this chapter and the history in the last one. That is enough to start. It is not enough to finish.

What the Numbers Mean - and What They Don't

Step back and put it all together. Here is what the data actually says:

Trust is local. The most consistent finding across every poll is that Americans trust their own local police far more than they trust "the police" as a national institution - seventy-four percent versus forty-five percent in the most recent Gallup readings. Any effort to build relationships has to start from that fact. The national conversation is poisoned; the local relationship is where the work happens.

The racial gap is real and it is large. On institutional confidence (fifty-two percent White versus twenty-four percent Black in 2025), on perceptions of force (seventy-five versus thirty-three in 2016), on accountability - the gaps are measured in tens of points, not single digits. This is not a misunderstanding that better public relations can fix. It reflects different experiences with the same institution.

The gap is narrowing on local measures. Black confidence in local police rose from fifty-nine to sixty-four percent between 2021 and 2024. Perceived fair treatment rose nine points since 2022. Expected courtesy and respect rose from sixty-nine to seventy-five percent. These are not victories - the levels remain far below White Americans' - but they are movement, and movement means the relationship is not frozen.

Trust is volatile. Institutional confidence went from forty-eight percent (2020) down to forty-three (2023), up to fifty-one (2024), down to forty-five (2025). That kind of swing means trust responds to events - to what departments do, to what the country sees, to whether promises are kept. Volatility is bad news when trust falls. It is good news when you are trying to build it, because it means building is possible.

What the numbers don't tell you: they don't tell you why any individual trusts or distrusts the police. They don't capture the Kathryn Johnston case, or the Wendy's on University Avenue, or the officer who coaches your kid's football team. National polls are a map of the terrain, not the terrain itself. The terrain is your block, your precinct, your city - and that is where the rest of this book goes.

The history in the first two chapters explains how we got here. The numbers in this chapter measure where "here" is. The chapters that follow are about what to do about it: what the research says actually builds trust, what your rights are in Georgia, and how to engage - as a community member, as a neighbor, as someone who refuses to accept that this is just the way it is. The trust gap is real, it is measured, and it is not permanent. What happens next is up to the people in the room - which includes you.

What the Community Experienced

Trust does not break in a vacuum. It breaks in specific moments, on specific streets, in front of specific witnesses – and then the story of those moments gets told and retold until it becomes the lens a whole neighborhood sees through.

In many Black neighborhoods in Atlanta and across Georgia, distrust of the police is not an attitude. It is a memory. And memories like these do not fade just because someone in a uniform says things have changed. They fade when the experience changes – and stay until it does.

This chapter is about what the community experienced. Not what anyone says they should have felt. What happened, what it felt like, and why it still matters.

(The full histories of the cases below are told in Chapter 2. What follows here is what those cases meant to the people who lived through them.)

November 21, 2006: Neal Street

Kathryn Johnston was 92 years old. She lived alone in the house on Neal Street in northwest Atlanta where she had lived for 17 years. Neighbors knew her. She was, by every account, a quiet woman who kept to herself and was afraid of the crime on her block – which is why she kept an old pistol in the house.

On the evening of November 21, 2006, three plainclothes Atlanta narcotics officers executed a no-knock search warrant on her home. The warrant was based on false information – officers had claimed an informant bought crack cocaine at the house. No such buy had happened.

When the officers broke in, Johnston fired one shot from her old pistol. The officers fired back 39 times. Five or six of those bullets struck her. One killed her. She died on the floor of her own home.

No drugs were found. There had never been any drugs.

Then came the part that turned a tragedy into a wound that would not close: the cover-up. Officers planted three bags of marijuana – seized in a separate raid that same day – in Johnston's basement to make it look like she was a dealer. One officer filed a false incident

report. The officers pressured their informant to lie and say the drug buy cited in the warrant had really happened. They met afterward to get their fabricated story straight before homicide investigators arrived.

The truth came out. In February 2009, three former officers were convicted in federal court of conspiring to violate Johnston's civil rights: Jason Smith got 10 years, Gregg Junnier got 6 years, Arthur Tesler got 5 years. Their sergeant, Wilbert Stallings, had already pleaded guilty to a related civil-rights conspiracy and received 18 months. The city paid \$4.9 million to Johnston's estate.

Here is what the community heard in all of that: police kicked in the door of a 92-year-old woman's home on a lie, killed her, found nothing, and then tried to frame her as a drug dealer to cover it up. The officers went to prison – which mattered – but the sentence the neighborhood carried was different: *they will lie on the warrant, they will lie on the body, and if nobody catches them, they will get away with it.*

The Johnston case led to real reforms. The police chief dismantled the narcotics unit and rebuilt it. Warrant requirements were tightened. The state made no-knock warrants harder to get. The citizen review board that now watches Atlanta police was created in the aftermath. All of that is true, and all of it is in Chapter 2.

But reforms are what institutions do. What communities do is remember. Ask anyone who was in Atlanta in 2006 what “Neal Street” means, and watch their face. That is what this chapter is about.

June 12, 2020: The Wendy's Drive-Thru

Rayshard Brooks was 27. On the night of June 12, 2020, officers Garrett Rolfe and Devin Brosnan found him asleep in his car in a Wendy's drive-thru on University Avenue in southeast Atlanta. What happened next was captured on body camera and bystander video, and millions of people watched it.

For roughly 40 minutes, the encounter was calm. The officers spoke with Brooks respectfully. He was cooperative. He answered questions. He agreed to a field sobriety test, and he failed it. When the officers moved to handcuff him, Brooks resisted – he wrestled free, grabbed Officer Brosnan's Taser, and ran. As he ran, he turned and fired the Taser toward Officer Rolfe. Rolfe

fired three shots. Brooks died at the hospital.

What followed was a civic earthquake compressed into weeks. Officer Rolfe was fired the next day. The police chief, Erika Shields, resigned. The Wendy's was set on fire during protests. The mayor said she did not believe the shooting was justified. The district attorney filed 11 charges against Rolfe, including felony murder.

Then the ground shifted again. In May 2021, the city's Civil Service Board reinstated Rolfe with back pay, ruling the city had denied him due process – without deciding whether he had violated policy. In August 2022, a special prosecutor dropped all charges against both officers, finding the use of deadly force “objectively reasonable” and that the officers “did not act with criminal intent.” In November 2022, the city council voted 15-0 to pay Brooks's family \$1 million to settle their wrongful-death lawsuit.

Sit with what that sequence felt like from the community's side. A man is dead. The mayor says it was not justified. Murder charges are filed. Then the officer gets his job back. Then all charges are dropped. Then the city pays the family a million dollars – which sure looks like an admission – while the legal system says no crime was committed.

You do not have to take a side on whether the shooting was legally justified to understand the damage. The damage was the whiplash. Forty minutes of calm on video, then a dead man, then two years of the system arguing with itself in public, ending in a result that satisfied almost no one. For a community already carrying Neal Street and a hundred smaller stories, the Brooks case confirmed the lesson: *even when the whole thing is on camera, we cannot agree on what we saw, and nobody is accountable.*

Over-Policed and Under-Protected

Ask residents of high-crime neighborhoods in Atlanta, and you will hear a paradox that sounds like a contradiction until you have lived it: *there are too many police, and there are never police when you need them.*

Too many, in the sense of stops. Being pulled over, stopped on the sidewalk, questioned, searched – experiences that many Black residents describe as routine in a way white residents in other parts of the city simply do not recognize. The national numbers back up the feeling. In a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, only 33 percent of Black adults said local police do an

excellent or good job using the right amount of force, compared with 75 percent of white adults. On treating racial and ethnic groups equally: 35 percent of Black adults versus 75 percent of white adults. By 2020, Pew found double-digit declines across the board – the share of all adults saying police use the right amount of force fell from 45 percent to 35 percent.

And never there when you need them, in the sense of response. Call about a break-in, a shooting, a domestic fight – and wait. And wait. Part of this is the staffing crisis described in the next chapter: when a department is running at 91 percent of its authorized strength, as agencies reported on average in a 2024 International Association of Chiefs of Police survey of 1,158 departments, there are simply fewer officers to send, and everything takes longer. But the community does not experience “a 9 percent staffing deficit.” The community experiences calling for help and watching the clock.

So the paradox hardens into a belief: *they show up fast when they want something from us, and slow when we need something from them*. Whether that belief is fair in every instance matters less than the fact that it is sincerely held – and sincerely held beliefs drive behavior. They drive whether a witness picks up the phone.

There are signs the picture is not frozen. Gallup’s Center on Black Voices reported in May 2025, using 2024 data, that 64 percent of Black adults expressed confidence in their local police – up from 59 percent in 2021, the highest in four years of measurement. Sixty-seven percent of Black adults said local police treat people like them fairly, up 9 points from 2022. Seventy-five percent expected to be treated with courtesy and respect, up from 69 percent in 2021. Those numbers still trail white adults by wide margins, but the direction matters: trust is not a fixed quantity. It responds to experience. Which is exactly why the experiences in this chapter matter so much – and why the experiences in the chapters ahead matter too.

Why People Don’t Talk

After a shooting in certain neighborhoods, detectives will tell you the same thing: nobody saw anything. And the community will tell you the same thing right back: nobody saw anything *they can afford to have seen*.

This is the witness problem, and it is one of the most misunderstood dynamics in American policing. Outsiders read silence as apathy – as proof the community does not care about its own

victims. That reading is wrong, and it is insulting. The silence is fear.

Fear of retaliation is the bluntest part. In neighborhoods where the people who committed the violence still live on the block, cooperating with police can mark you and your family. The “no snitching” code that outsiders mock as street culture is, at its root, a survival calculation made by people who have watched what happens to witnesses. When the state cannot guarantee your safety after you testify – and in practice, it often cannot – silence is rational.

Then there is the quieter fear: that talking to police will make *you* a suspect, or get a cousin or a brother swept up, or bring scrutiny onto an household where someone has an outstanding warrant for unpaid fines. Every contact with the system carries risk for people living on its margins, and people do the math.

And beneath both is the trust deficit this whole chapter describes. Cooperation is an act of faith – faith that the system will use what you give it justly, protect you, and follow through. When that faith has been broken the way Neal Street broke it, asking for cooperation without rebuilding the faith is asking people to act against everything their experience has taught them.

The cruel result is a cycle. Witnesses do not come forward. Cases stall. Shooters walk. The community concludes the police either cannot or will not solve the murders – which deepens the distrust, which makes the next witness even less likely to talk. Breaking that cycle requires someone to go first. This book’s argument is that it has to be the institution, because the institution is the one with the power.

How It Echoes

One bad encounter does not stay with one person. It moves through a family like an inheritance.

A grandmother who was in Atlanta in 2006 tells her daughter about the old woman on Neal Street. The daughter, who was a teenager when she watched the Brooks video in 2020, tells her own son to keep his hands on the wheel and say “yes, sir” and “no, sir” – not because she thinks every officer is dangerous, but because she loves him and the cost of being wrong is everything. The son is twelve. He has never had a bad encounter with police. He already has the lesson.

That is how distrust becomes generational. It does not require every officer to be bad. It does not even require most encounters to go badly. It requires only that the worst encounters be vivid, be

real, and go unanswered – and then be retold by people you trust more than you trust the institution.

This is worth sitting with, because it explains something that frustrates a lot of good officers: / never did anything to this kid, so why does he look at me like that? The answer is that he is not looking at you. He is looking at every story he has ever been told, standing in your uniform. You inherited the uniform. He inherited the stories. Neither of you chose your inheritance. Both of you have to deal with it.

The Small Cuts

Not every wound comes from a headline case. Most of what breaks trust is smaller, repeated so often it becomes weather.

A traffic stop for a tag light out. A stop on the sidewalk because an officer has “reasonable suspicion” – the legal standard from the 1968 Supreme Court case *Terry v. Ohio*, which lets an officer briefly detain and question someone based on specific facts suggesting criminal activity, and pat down outer clothing if they suspect a weapon. The standard is real law, and officers use it lawfully every day.

But here is what it feels like from the other side of it: you are walking home from work, or driving home from the store, and you are stopped, questioned, and searched – and then released, because there was nothing. Nothing found, nothing charged, nothing to show for the twenty minutes except the message. One such stop is an annoyance. Ten is a pattern. Fifty, across a young man’s teens and twenties, is an education. The lesson it teaches is that your freedom of movement is conditional in a way other people’s is not.

The research file for this book does not contain a Georgia-specific count of how often this happens, so this book will not invent one. But the perception gap is measured: when two-thirds of Black adults in Gallup’s 2024 data say they are not confident local police treat people like them fairly, the small cuts are a large part of why. Big cases break trust all at once. Small cuts break it a little at a time, every day, for years.

The Complaint That Goes Nowhere

After Kathryn Johnston's death, Atlanta built an accountability channel: the Atlanta Citizen Review Board, established in 2007 as an independent agency where citizens could file misconduct complaints against officers – fourteen categories, from abusive language to excessive force to death. It got subpoena power in 2010. On paper, it was exactly what a community asking for oversight would want.

In July 2025, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution investigation found that the board had not opened a single investigation into a police shooting or in-custody death between 2020 and 2024. The board's explanation: the police department never notified it that cases were ready for review. For four years, the oversight body and the department it oversaw simply... missed each other. A 2025 agreement now requires the department to notify the board within 24 hours when deadly-force cases are closed – a fix, but one that arrived only after the newspaper found the gap.

Set aside blame for a moment and consider what this looked like from a grieving family's perspective. You are told there is an independent board. You file, or you wait for the board to act. Nothing happens. Not because anyone necessarily conspired – but because the machinery quietly failed to engage. The result is the same as if no board existed: another institution that promised accountability and delivered process.

This is how trust breaks even when no one is acting in bad faith. It breaks in the gap between what the system says it does and what people watch it do.

What the “Defund” Debate Was Actually About

No honest account of the last few years can skip the fight over “defund the police” – and no honest account can pretend it was one single argument. It was at least three different arguments wearing the same slogan, plus a fourth argument from the other side, and much of the shouting came from people talking past each other.

The first argument was about *reallocation*: move some portion of police budgets toward the things that prevent crime before it happens – mental-health crisis responders, housing, youth jobs, drug treatment, violence-interruption programs. The claim was that police had become the default response to every social problem, and that some of those problems would be better handled – and more cheaply – by someone who is not carrying a gun.

The second argument was about *abolition*: the position that policing as an institution cannot be reformed and should ultimately be dismantled and replaced. This was always a minority position, but it was loud, and it defined the debate in the public mind far beyond its numbers.

The third argument was *reform without the slogan*: keep police funded, even increase funding, but tie it to accountability – better training, stricter use-of-force rules, civilian oversight, an end to practices like no-knock warrants. Many elected officials who rejected the word “defund” embraced large parts of this agenda.

And the fourth argument, from opponents of all three, was that reducing police presence – in budgets, in staffing, in morale – would leave neighborhoods less safe, and that the neighborhoods that would suffer most would be the same high-crime, majority-Black neighborhoods whose residents were already waiting too long for help.

What matters for this book is not which of these positions was right. What matters is what the debate revealed: a country that could not agree on what its police are *for*. Are they crime-fighters, social workers with badges, an occupying force, a thin blue line? The community experienced the argument as proof that nobody in power had a coherent answer – and in the absence of an answer, every side retreated to its memories. Which is where this chapter began.

Where This Leaves Us

Everything in this chapter is real. The 39 shots on Neal Street are real. The cover-up is real – it is in federal court records. The 40 calm minutes before Rayshard Brooks died are real; so is the two-year whiplash of charges filed and dropped. The polling numbers are real: the gaps between Black and white perceptions of policing are among the widest in American public life, measured again and again by Gallup and Pew. The fear that keeps witnesses silent is real. The grandmother’s story is real.

None of this is the whole story. The next chapter tells the other half – what the officers standing on those same streets experienced. Both halves are true at the same time. That is the hard thing, and it is the only honest starting point.

Any bridge between law enforcement and the community has to start here: with the acknowledgment that these experiences happened, that they are documented, and that no one gets to skip past them on the way to reconciliation. You do not build trust by telling people their

memories are wrong. You build it by proving, over time, that the future will be different from the past.

What Officers Experienced

Now turn the camera around.

The last chapter was about what the community lived through. This one is about what the officers standing on those same streets lived through – and it is told with the same seriousness, because anything less would be dishonest. You cannot understand why trust broke if you only listen to one side of the breaking.

Most Americans have never thought hard about what it feels like to do this job. This chapter is that thought, taken seriously.

The Danger Is Real

Start with the numbers, because they are not abstract to the people who live inside them.

In 2024, 64 American law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty, according to the FBI's Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted report released in May 2025. Nearly three-quarters of them – 71.9 percent – died from gunshot wounds. Sixty-three were men; one was a woman. They had served an average of eight years. The South lost 29 officers in a single year, a 45 percent increase over the 20 killed in 2023.

The yearly tolls tell their own story: 46 officers feloniously killed in 2020, 73 in 2021, 61 in 2022, 60 in 2023, 64 in 2024. Behind each of those numbers is a funeral, a folded flag, a family that will never be the same.

And killing is only the far edge of the violence. In 2024, officers were assaulted 85,730 times – a rate of 13.5 assaults per 100 officers, the highest officer-assault rate in the past ten years, and the rate has been climbing since 2022. About 457 officers were assaulted and injured by firearms in 2024; the year before, it was roughly 500, itself a ten-year high. The most common circumstance in which officers were assaulted in 2024 was the most ordinary one there is: responding to unlawful or suspicious activity. A call. A stop. A knock.

Add the accidental deaths – 36 officers dead in the first ten months of 2024 alone, most of them in motor-vehicle crashes – and the shape of the job comes into focus: it is one of the few

professions in America where going to work carries a standing chance of not coming home.

Here is what that does to a human being over time. Every traffic stop contains the same quiet calculation: *is this the one?* The driver reaching into the glove box – wallet or weapon? The domestic call at 2 a.m. – argument or ambush? Officers are trained to manage this fear, and the good ones do, thousands of times a day. But the fear does not go away because you are trained. It sits underneath every shift, and it compounds with every line-of-duty funeral, every news story about an officer shot on a routine call.

When community members ask why an officer seemed tense, or why hands went to a holster fast, part of the answer – not the whole answer, but part of it – is this: the officer has a spreadsheet in their head, updated every year by the FBI, that says people in this uniform get killed doing exactly what they were doing that night.

That does not excuse misconduct. It explains the starting emotional condition of the job. Both things can be true.

Fewer Officers, More Calls

Now imagine doing that job while your department slowly empties out.

In a 2024 survey of 1,158 law enforcement agencies by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 70 percent said hiring is more difficult now than it was five years ago. Agencies reported operating at an average of just 91 percent of their authorized strength – roughly a one-in-ten staffing hole, spread across the country. Research from the Police Executive Research Forum found that officer numbers declined from 2020 through 2023, with only a modest increase in 2024: more officers leaving the profession than entering it, despite increased hiring efforts.

What does 91 percent feel like on the ground? It feels like slower response times – the same slow response times the last chapter described from the community's side. The two experiences are the same event viewed from opposite ends: the resident watches the clock, and the dispatcher stares at a board with no free unit to send.

It feels like double shifts and forced overtime, week after week. It feels like detectives carrying caseloads that would have been split between two people five years ago. It feels like the community-policing walk-throughs, the school visits, the sitting-down-with-the-neighborhood time

– the exact activities that build trust – being the first things cut, because when you are down ten percent, every warm body goes to 911 calls. Presence is a luxury. Reaction is all you can afford. And it feeds on itself. Short staffing burns out the officers who remain. Burned-out officers leave. The hole gets deeper. The IACP numbers are not just a human-resources problem; they are a trust problem, because a department that can only react can never get ahead of anything, and a community that only ever sees police in reactive mode – lights flashing, worst moments – never gets to meet them any other way.

Under the Microscope

Then came 2020, and the scrutiny changed everything.

After the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody, public confidence in police as an institution fell to 48 percent in Gallup's 2020 measurement, then to a record low of 43 percent in 2023. It recovered to 51 percent in 2024 – the largest year-over-year jump Gallup recorded for any institution – but the experience of those years left a mark on the profession that has not faded.

Officers describe it this way: every action is recorded now – body camera, dash camera, a dozen bystander phones – and every split-second decision can be replayed, slowed down, and judged for months by people who were never in the room. That is not a complaint about accountability; most officers will tell you the camera protects them more often than it hurts them. It is a description of pressure. Imagine doing the most stressful parts of your job knowing that any mistake, any misjudgment, any moment of human imperfection could end your career and make you nationally infamous by nightfall.

Some officers will tell you this scrutiny made them hesitate – pull back from proactive stops, wait for the call rather than go looking for the problem. Researchers and police leaders argue about how widespread that pullback is and what it caused; this book will not settle that argument, because the evidence is contested and this chapter is about experience, not adjudication. But the *feeling* is widely reported and sincerely held: that the job became one where you are second-guessed no matter what you do – damned for acting, damned for not acting – and that the people doing the second-guessing have never stood where you stand.

There is a particular sting in this for officers who joined the profession to help. They took a dangerous, modestly paid job out of a sense of service, and then watched the institution they serve become, in much of the public conversation, a symbol of everything wrong with America. That is a lonely feeling. It has driven good people out of the profession – which brings us back to the staffing hole, which brings us back to the slower response times, which brings us back to the last chapter. The cycle does not belong to one side. It belongs to everyone.

Sent to Do Everyone Else's Job

There is one more grievance officers carry that rarely gets a fair hearing, and it goes like this: *we are asked to do everyone else's job, and then blamed for not doing it well.*

Think about what a patrol officer is actually dispatched to in a single week. A mental-health crisis. A homeless encampment. A teenager in crisis at school. A neighbor dispute. A welfare check on an elderly person who has not been seen in days. An overdose. A person screaming on a street corner who needs a hospital, not handcuffs.

Society long ago decided that when something goes wrong and no one knows who to call, you call the police. So the police became the default response to poverty, addiction, mental illness, and despair – problems they were never trained to solve, carrying the one tool – lawful force – that is wrong for most of them. Then, when the encounter goes badly, the public asks why an armed officer was sent to a mental-health crisis in the first place. The officer, who did not choose the dispatch system, absorbs the blame for a decision made far above their pay grade.

This is not an argument against accountability. It is an argument for honesty about the job description. Officers did not write the 911 system. Many of them would welcome – and in some cities are beginning to get – civilian crisis teams and diversion programs that take these calls instead (the later chapters of this book describe several, including Atlanta's own). But until those alternatives exist at scale, the officer on the midnight shift is the one who shows up when a family calls about a son in psychosis – with fifteen minutes of crisis training and a gun – because no one else is coming.

If you want to understand officer frustration, start here: they know they are the wrong tool for half their calls, they say so themselves, and they get sent anyway.

The Camera Cuts Both Ways

Body-worn cameras entered policing as a community demand – a check on misconduct, a record of the truth. What is less often said is how many officers came to see the camera as their best protection.

A camera does not only catch the bad officer. Far more often, it exonerates the good one: the complaint of rudeness disproved by the audio, the allegation of excessive force contradicted by the video, the lawsuit that collapses when the footage plays. Ask officers privately and many will tell you they want the camera on – it is their witness when no one else in the room is on their side.

Atlanta's own history proves how seriously the camera question is taken. In January 2019, an Atlanta officer serving on an FBI task force shot and killed Jimmy Atchison; the officer was not wearing a body camera, and no gun was recovered from Atchison. The department's response was striking: Atlanta pulled its officers from federal task forces with the FBI, the DEA, and the U.S. Marshals because those agencies would not allow body cameras. The city chose the camera over the federal partnership. Whatever you think of that trade, it tells you the camera is not a minor accessory. It is the record on which everyone's account – the community's and the officer's – now depends.

And yet the camera has limits that feed the microscope problem. A body camera shows what the lens saw, from the officer's chest, in the worst seconds of an encounter. It does not show what the officer perceived in the dark, or the three similar calls from last month that shaped their instincts, or the adrenaline flooding their system. Video feels like the whole truth. It is a truth – an important one – but the officers living under it will tell you it is not the whole one. That gap between what the video shows and what the moment felt like is where much of the second-guessing lives.

The Weight They Carry

There is a part of this job that officers rarely talk about in public, and this book will treat it with care: the accumulated weight of what they see.

Shift after shift, year after year: the dead children, the domestic violence scenes, the suicides, the overdose bodies, the things people do to each other that most of us are mercifully never shown. Officers are exposed to human trauma at a frequency no civilian life prepares you for, and then they go home and are expected to be normal at the dinner table.

This book will not throw statistics at this subject that it cannot source responsibly. What can be said, plainly and without exaggeration, is that the combination – real physical danger, relentless trauma exposure, punishing schedules, public hostility, and a culture that has historically told officers to tough it out rather than ask for help – is a recipe for exactly the kind of strain you would expect: broken sleep, broken marriages, drinking, anger that has nowhere to go. Departments have gotten better at peer support and wellness programs in recent years, and that progress matters. But the weight is structural. It comes with the uniform.

When a community member encounters an officer who seems cold, or flat, or running on empty – sometimes that is a character problem. Sometimes it is a human being in year twelve of carrying things no one should have to carry, on four hours of sleep, working their third overtime shift that week because the department is at 91 percent. Understanding that does not excuse a bad encounter. It explains why “just be nicer” is not a plan, and why the solutions in the later chapters of this book have to include the wellbeing of officers – not as a favor to police, but as a prerequisite for the kind of policing a community can trust.

The Millions of Calls That Go Fine

Here is the part of the story that never makes the news, for the simple reason that news is about what breaks.

Every single day in America, officers respond to millions of encounters that end without incident. The domestic dispute talked down without anyone being touched. The lost child found and brought home. The overdose reversed. The directions given, the flat tire helped with, the noise complaint resolved with a conversation instead of a citation. The traffic stop where the officer was professional and the driver drove away with nothing worse than a warning and a story about a decent cop.

None of that is dramatic. None of it trends. But it is the overwhelming statistical reality of policing: the vast, vast majority of police-civilian encounters end peacefully, many of them helpfully, and

the public never hears about a single one.

This matters for two reasons. First, because officers know it, and it wounds them to be judged entirely by the worst moments of the worst officers – to have a career of quiet decency erased by someone else's crime, captured on someone else's video, in a city they have never visited. Second, because the community's picture of policing is shaped almost entirely by those worst moments, which means the picture is systematically distorted. Both things are true: the worst moments are real and must be confronted, *and* they are not representative of most of what most officers do most days.

Any honest bridge has to carry both of those truths across it.

Good Cops Hate Bad Cops

There is a lazy story that all officers protect all other officers, no matter what. Like most lazy stories, it has just enough truth in it to survive – the code of silence is real, it has been documented, and this book does not deny it. But it misses the deeper truth, which is this: no one is more harmed by a bad officer than a good one.

Think about it from the good officer's position. Your safety depends on the community's cooperation – on witnesses who talk, on residents who call, on the benefit of the doubt in a tense moment. A bad officer burns all of that down. Every Kathryn Johnston, every act of corruption or cruelty or cowardice, makes *your* next shift more dangerous, because it teaches the next person you meet not to trust you. The bad officer does the deed; the good officer pays for it, in distrust, in danger, in the slow erosion of the legitimacy the whole profession needs to function.

Good officers know this. Many of them are angrier about misconduct than any activist, because they understand the cost in a way outsiders cannot: it is measured in their own safety. The officers who pushed for body cameras, who report the colleague who crosses the line, who do the job with patience and restraint day after day in neighborhoods that have every reason to doubt them – they are not the problem. They are the proof that the job can be done right, and they are the reason the later chapters of this book argue for reform *with* officers, not against them.

Where This Leaves Us

The last chapter ended with the community's truth: the experiences are real, they are documented, and any bridge has to start by acknowledging them.

This chapter ends with the mirror image, held with equal weight: officers are human beings doing one of the hardest, most dangerous jobs in America. Sixty-four of them were killed doing it in a single year. Eighty-five thousand were assaulted. They do it shorthanded, under microscopes, carrying trauma most of us will never see – and the overwhelming majority of them do it without ever harming anyone.

Any bridge between law enforcement and the community has to start here too: with the acknowledgment that this is real, that it is documented, and that no one gets to skip past it either.

Two chapters. Two sets of experiences. Both true. The rest of this book is about what we build on top of that honesty – because a bridge anchored only on one side is not a bridge. It is a pier, reaching out over the water toward no one.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE: THE SCIENCE OF TRUST

Trust Is Not a Feeling. It Is a Science.

Everybody talks about “rebuilding trust” between police and communities like it is a mood - like if we just had the right conversation, the right town hall, the right slogan, trust would come back. That is not how it works.

Trust is built the same way it is broken: in encounters. A traffic stop. A 911 call. A knock on the door. Ten minutes, sometimes less. And there is now decades of research - including randomized experiments, the gold standard of science - showing exactly what makes those encounters build trust or destroy it.

The researcher's name is Tom Tyler. He is a psychologist at Yale who has spent his career studying why people obey the law. His answer is not what most people expect. People do not cooperate with police mainly because they fear punishment. They cooperate because they believe the police are legitimate - that the authority is rightful and fair. And what creates that belief is not whether people win or lose their case. It is whether the process felt fair.

That is the core idea of this chapter: the science of trust. It has four pillars, it has been tested in the field, and it works.

The Four Pillars

Tyler's framework, confirmed across the research literature in a 2013 Campbell Collaboration systematic review by Mazerolle and colleagues, comes down to four things. Plain language versions:

1. Voice - Let people tell their side.

Before a decision gets made, people need a chance to speak. In a traffic stop, that means the officer listens for thirty seconds before deciding. In a neighborhood dispute call, it means hearing both neighbors, not just the one who called first.

Voice does not mean the person gets their way. It means they were heard. Research shows that being heard changes how people experience the exact same outcome. A ticket you got after explaining yourself feels different from a ticket handed through a window with no words exchanged. Same fine. Different trust.

2. Neutrality - Same rules for everybody.

Decisions have to be made without bias, and the rules have to be applied consistently. This is the pillar communities talk about most, because it is the one they can see. Who gets stopped. Who gets searched. Who gets the warning and who gets the cuffs, for the same behavior.

Neutrality does not require officers to be robots. It requires that the reasons for a decision would hold up if the person's race, neighborhood, or income were different. When communities believe enforcement is neutral, cooperation goes up. When they believe it is not, every encounter - even a fair one - gets read through the lens of suspicion.

3. Respect - Treat people with dignity.

This is about the basics: how you talk to someone, whether you explain what you are doing, whether you treat a person like a person even when you are arresting them. Respect costs nothing. Its absence costs everything.

Small things carry enormous weight here. Saying "here is why I stopped you" in the first thirty seconds. Not raising your voice when someone raises theirs. Explaining what happens next. These are not soft skills. They are trust skills, and the research says they change outcomes.

4. Trustworthiness - Show you are trying to do right.

People need to believe the authority is sincerely trying to act in the community's best interest - not protecting its own, not hitting numbers, not covering for its own people. Trustworthiness is earned when officers and departments are transparent about mistakes, when discipline is real, when the department's actions match its words.

This is the pillar that takes the longest to build and the least time to destroy. One covered-up incident can undo years of trustworthy behavior. We will talk about accountability systems - the machinery that protects this pillar - in the next chapter.

Why Fairness Beats Outcomes

Here is Tyler's finding that surprises almost everyone, summarized from his article "Procedural Justice and the Courts": most people care more about procedural fairness than about winning or losing their particular case.

Read that again. The person who gets the ticket, loses the dispute, or even gets arrested can still walk away believing the system is legitimate - if the process was fair. And the person who "wins" can still walk away distrustful if the process felt rigged, rushed, or disrespectful.

This matters because it flips the usual conversation. Communities are often told, in effect, "the outcome was correct, so you should accept it." The science says that is backwards. What people need first is a fair process. Fair procedures legitimize decisions - even unfavorable ones - and create lasting commitment to obey the law. Tyler's foundational book on this is *Why People Obey the Law* (Yale University Press, 1990; revised second edition, Princeton, 2006).

There is a second half to this. Gallup's researchers put it plainly in 2025: in the absence of trust, the criminal justice system loses some of its perceived legitimacy, and it becomes more difficult for police to gain community members' cooperation. That is not an opinion. It is a practical problem. Policing depends on cooperation - witnesses who talk, victims who report, neighborhoods that share information. Unfair process does not just feel bad. It makes policing harder.

The Experiments: It Works in the Real World

This is not just theory. Researchers have run field experiments - randomly assigning officers or neighborhoods to procedural-justice training and comparing them against controls. Here is what they found.

The multicity trial (Weisburd and colleagues, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2022). Across 120 crime hot spots in three cities, with 28 officers,

researchers tested what happens when officers are trained in procedural justice. The results: trained officers behaved more justly in the field, made fewer arrests, and - critically - residents were significantly less likely to perceive police as harassing them or using unnecessary force. And crime? A significant relative decline of 14 percent in crime incidents in the procedural-justice hot spots. Let that sink in: treating people more fairly did not just improve perceptions. It reduced crime.

Chicago (Wood and colleagues, 2020). A daylong procedural-justice training for roughly 8,500 Chicago officers was evaluated quasi-experimentally. The result: a 10 percent reduction in public complaints against police and a 6.4 percent reduction in officer use of force. One day of training. Measurable drops in complaints and force.

Chicago police academy (Skogan and colleagues, 2015). Training increased officers' support for giving people voice, treating them with dignity and respect, and acting neutrally - with large effect sizes. Honest caveat: the effect on officers' sense of "trust" itself was not statistically significant in the long term. Training changes behavior more easily than it changes deep attitudes. That is worth knowing, because it tells departments that one training is not enough - the practices have to be reinforced, supervised, and sustained.

The bottom line from the research: procedural-justice training has moderate-to-strong evidence behind it. It is one of the best-supported trust-building tools policing has.

What It Looks Like in Practice

Theory is fine. Here is what the four pillars look like in three everyday encounters.

The traffic stop. The officer approaches, greets the driver, and in the first thirty seconds says why the stop happened: "I stopped you because your taillight is out." Voice: the officer asks, "Is there anything I should know?" and listens to the answer before deciding on a warning or citation. Neutrality: the decision follows the same criteria the officer would use on any driver on any street. Respect: calm tone, explanation of each step - "I'm going to run your license, I'll be right back." Trustworthiness: if the driver asks a question, the officer answers it honestly instead of shutting it down.

None of this takes extra time. It takes intention. And the research says the driver who experiences this stop - even the one who gets the ticket - is more likely to see the police as

legitimate.

The 911 response. Two neighbors are in a dispute over a property line, and it is getting heated. The procedurally just response: hear both sides fully before deciding anything (voice), apply the same standard to both households regardless of who called first or who lives where (neutrality), speak to both with dignity even when they are shouting (respect), and explain clearly what the officer can and cannot do, and what happens next (trustworthiness). The dispute may not be resolved. But both neighbors leave feeling the process was fair - and they are more likely to call for help next time instead of handling it themselves.

The neighborhood meeting. A commander stands in front of residents angry about a recent incident. Procedural justice here means: let residents speak without being cut off or managed (voice), answer questions directly instead of hiding behind policy language (neutrality and trustworthiness), acknowledge the harm residents feel even when the facts are still being investigated (respect). These meetings do not fix anything by themselves. But a department that shows up and listens fairly is building the trustworthiness pillar in public.

De-escalation Training That Actually Works

Procedural justice is about how officers treat people. De-escalation training is about how officers handle conflict without force. The two go together, and here the research has a clear hero - and an honest warning.

The hero is PERF's ICAT program (Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics), developed by the Police Executive Research Forum. In the first rigorous test of the program - a randomized controlled trial at the Louisville Metro Police Department, published by Engel and colleagues in *Criminology & Public Policy* in 2022 - ICAT was associated with 28 percent fewer use-of-force incidents, 26 percent fewer citizen injuries, and 36 percent fewer officer injuries. Read that last number again: fewer officer injuries too. De-escalation protects everybody.

An Indianapolis randomized trial found a 20 percent reduction in use of force associated with PERF training (reported in *Governing*, 2026). A Chicago trial of related training found officers used force less often and sustained fewer injuries.

Now the honest warning. A 2019 systematic review by Engel and colleagues looked at 64 de-escalation training evaluations across all fields - and found that no prior evaluations of

de-escalation training in policing existed at all. ICAT's Louisville and Indianapolis trials are the exception, not the rule. And verbal-de-escalation-only training - just teaching officers to talk differently, without the full tactical and decision-making framework - has not shown force reduction. So the evidence grade here is precise: strong for ICAT specifically, thin for de-escalation training generally. Departments should know the difference before they buy a program.

There is one more honest finding from Louisville: training decays. Forty percent of officers reported needing refresher training. A single class is a start, not a solution. Departments that want the results have to keep training, keep supervising, and keep measuring.

For Georgia readers: the Atlanta Police Department required ICAT de-escalation training for its officers, with most of the department trained on use of force, de-escalation, and ICAT by the end of October 2021. That is the research-backed program, in our own backyard.

The Legitimacy Loop: Why Fairness Makes Policing Work

There is a practical reason all of this matters, beyond anyone's feelings. Policing runs on cooperation.

Think about how crimes actually get solved. A witness decides to talk. A victim decides to report instead of handling it on the street. A neighborhood shares what it knows about who is causing the problem on the block. None of that can be compelled. All of it depends on whether people believe the police are legitimate - whether they believe cooperating will lead to something fair.

Tyler's research describes a loop. Fair process builds legitimacy. Legitimacy produces voluntary compliance and cooperation. Cooperation makes policing more effective - more witnesses, more information, less resistance. Effectiveness, in turn, reinforces legitimacy. The loop runs in both directions. Unfair process drains legitimacy, which dries up cooperation, which makes policing harder and more confrontational, which drains legitimacy further. Every department in America is somewhere on that loop. The question is which direction they are moving.

This is why the polling numbers matter. When Gallup found in 2024 that 74 percent of Americans expressed confidence in their local police - up from 71 percent in 2023, with Black Americans' confidence rising from 59 percent in 2021 to 64 percent - that was not just a mood swing. It was a signal about the loop. More confidence means more cooperation means more effective

policing. But the gaps remain real: in Gallup's 2025 institutional confidence measure, 52 percent of White adults expressed confidence in the police compared to 24 percent of Black adults. The loop is not running the same way in every community. That is exactly why procedural justice has to be practiced most deliberately where trust is thinnest.

What Departments Have to Do Structurally

Training individual officers is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The research is clear that procedural justice has to be built into how a department operates - what gets measured, what gets rewarded, and what gets corrected.

First, supervision. Officers take their cues from sergeants and lieutenants. If a supervisor praises the quick arrest and says nothing about the respectful encounter, officers learn what the department actually values. Departments serious about procedural justice train their supervisors first, and they review body-camera footage not just for violations but for examples of good practice - then they show those examples in roll call.

Second, measurement. You cannot manage what you do not measure. Departments can track complaints, use-of-force incidents, and - just as important - positive indicators: surveys of people who had police contact, community perception surveys, officer injury rates. The Louisville ICAT trial measured all of these. Departments that only count arrests will only get arrests.

Third, hiring and promotion. Some departments have begun screening for the traits procedural justice requires - communication skill, emotional steadiness, community orientation - and weighing them in promotions. A department that promotes its best communicators is telling every officer what excellence looks like.

Fourth, policy. Procedural justice cannot survive inside policies that contradict it. If the written policy rewards stop-and-frisk numbers, no amount of fairness training will overcome the incentive. Policies on stops, searches, pursuits, and force have to be consistent with the four pillars, or officers get two different messages and follow the one tied to their paycheck.

None of this is exotic. It is management. But it is the difference between a department that sends officers to a training and a department that actually changes.

Myths Worth Retiring

A few misunderstandings about procedural justice come up so often they are worth addressing directly.

Myth: “Procedural justice means letting people off.” The Weisburd trial’s officers made fewer arrests - and crime fell 14 percent. Fewer arrests did not mean less safety. It meant officers were resolving more situations without the arrest being the tool for everything. Being fair is not the same as being permissive.

Myth: “This is just about being nice.” Respect is one pillar of four. Neutrality - applying rules consistently, without bias - is the one communities scrutinize most, and it has nothing to do with niceness. A firm, direct officer who explains herself, applies the same standard to everyone, and listens before deciding is practicing procedural justice. A smiling officer who enforces the rules unevenly is not.

Myth: “Communities just want officers to agree with them.” Tyler’s core finding refutes this directly: people care more about fair process than about winning. The resident who disagrees with the outcome but felt heard, treated evenly, and treated with dignity will grant legitimacy. The one who “won” through a process that felt rigged will not.

Myth: “One training fixes it.” Skogan’s academy study showed attitudes shift; the Louisville decay finding showed skills fade without reinforcement. Procedural justice is a practice, like fitness. You do not get fit from one workout.

What This Means for Us

Here is what the science asks of each side.

For residents: you have a right to expect these four pillars in every encounter. Voice, neutrality, respect, trustworthiness. When you do not get them, that is not just a bad experience - the research says it damages the legitimacy of the whole system, and you have complaint channels to use (more on those in the next chapter).

For officers: procedural justice is not about being soft. The officers in the Weisburd trial made fewer arrests and saw crime drop 14 percent. The Louisville officers used less force and got hurt

less. Fair process is not the enemy of effective policing. The evidence says it is one of the most effective tools policing has.

And for all of us: trust is not built in a press conference. It is built in ten-minute encounters, thousands of them, every day, done fairly. The science is clear. The question is whether we will use it.

OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability Is Not Anti-Police

Let us start with the frame, because this chapter gets misunderstood.

Accountability is not the opposite of supporting police. It is how you support the good ones. Every profession that the public trusts has a way of removing the people who should not be in it - doctors lose licenses, lawyers get disbarred, teachers lose certification. Policing carries a gun and the power to take freedom. If any profession needs real accountability, it is this one.

And here is the part that does not get said enough: good officers want bad officers gone too. A corrupt or brutal officer makes every honest officer's job harder. They poison the witness pool, they destroy the community cooperation that good policing depends on, and they put their fellow officers in danger by turning neighborhoods hostile. When accountability works, it protects the public and it protects the profession.

So this chapter is not an attack. It is a tour of the machinery: the boards, the laws, the investigators, and the systems that are supposed to catch misconduct and correct it. Some of this machinery works well. Some of it is still being built. All of it matters to the relationship between law enforcement and the community - because the trustworthiness pillar from the last chapter stands or falls on whether people believe misconduct has consequences.

Civilian Review Boards: How They Work

When a resident believes an officer crossed the line, where do they go? In many cities, the answer is a civilian review board - a body of non-police citizens empowered to look into complaints against officers.

Boards come in different strengths. Some can only review completed internal investigations and comment on them. Some can run their own investigations, hold hearings, and issue findings. The strongest have subpoena power - the legal authority to compel testimony and documents. But here is the key nuance almost everywhere in America: most boards, even strong ones, can only recommend discipline. The final decision on whether an officer is punished, and how, still sits

with the police chief.

That advisory limit frustrates a lot of people. It is worth understanding why it exists and what boards can still accomplish within it. A board with subpoena power and its own investigators can establish facts independently - which matters enormously, because the community's deepest suspicion is that the police investigate themselves and find nothing. An independent finding of misconduct, made public, creates pressure that a purely internal process never does. And boards typically recommend policy changes too - which can prevent the next incident, not just punish the last one.

Atlanta's Board

Atlanta has one of the stronger models in the country. The Atlanta Citizen Review Board - the ACRB - was established by city ordinance in 2007, in the aftermath of the 2006 killing of Kathryn Johnston, the 92-year-old woman shot by narcotics officers serving a warrant based on false information. The board was quite literally born from a community's demand that "never again" mean something structural.

Here is how it works. The ACRB is an independent city agency - not part of the police department. It has 15 citizen board members and a staff of 14, including 4 investigators. It handles 14 categories of complaints against sworn Atlanta police and corrections officers: abusive language, false arrest, false imprisonment, harassment, excessive force, serious bodily injury, death caused by an officer, discrimination, abuse of authority, retaliation, failure to provide identification, and violations of standard operating procedure, among others.

Its powers are real: it can investigate complaints itself, mediate disputes, hold public hearings, and issue public reports. In May 2010 it gained subpoena power, along with full access to police personnel, documents, and records. It advises the mayor, the city council, and the police chief. And it can recommend discipline against individual officers - including serious discipline.

But - and this is the nuance that matters - its recommendations are advisory. The chief makes the final call. The board's leverage is independence, transparency, and public pressure, not direct punishment.

Two recent developments tell you both the promise and the struggle. In 2020, the city council expanded the board's duties to require independent review of all cases in which police allegedly used deadly force. That was a major step. But in 2025, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution

investigation found that the board had not opened a single investigation into police shootings or custody deaths between 2020 and 2024 - the board said the police department had never notified it that cases were ready for review. In response, a 2025 agreement now requires the department to notify the board within 24 hours when deadly-force cases are closed by internal affairs or cleared by the district attorney's office, and the requirement was written into the department's manual.

That story is the whole chapter in miniature: a strong structure on paper, a gap in practice, and a correction forced by scrutiny. Accountability systems do not run themselves. They have to be watched, too.

Practical note for Atlantans: complaints to the ACRB must be filed within 365 days of the incident. You can file online, by phone, by mail, by email, or in person - and a signed complaint is required.

The Rest of Georgia

Atlanta is the outlier. Beyond it, civilian oversight in Georgia is thin. In November 2021, Athens-Clarke County's mayor and commission unanimously approved a public safety oversight board to review complaints, misconduct investigations, and controversial incidents, with input to the sheriff's office and corrections. In June 2025, the Savannah Police Department added civilian participants to its use-of-force review committee, giving them full participation in the review process. Those are the only other standing civilian oversight bodies confirmed in Georgia. If you live anywhere else in the state, your complaint goes through the department's own internal process - which is why knowing how to file, and where else to turn, matters so much.

The honest evidence grade on review boards: they are a standard accountability channel, but there is no rigorous causal evidence that they measurably increase community trust. Cite them descriptively, as infrastructure. A board is a necessary condition for accountability, not a sufficient one.

When the Feds Step In: Pattern-or-Practice Investigations

Sometimes the problem is not one officer. It is a pattern - a department whose practices, as a matter of routine, violate people's constitutional rights. For that, there is a federal tool.

Under the police misconduct provision of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 - originally 42 U.S.C. Section 14141, now recodified at 34 U.S.C. Section 12601 - the U.S. Department of Justice can file civil lawsuits against law enforcement agencies engaged in a “pattern or practice” of unconstitutional misconduct. These investigations do not target individual officers for criminal prosecution. They target the agency’s systems: its use-of-force policies, its stop-and-search practices, its supervision, its training, its discipline.

When DOJ finds a pattern or practice, the typical outcome is a consent decree - a court-enforced reform agreement between the federal government and the city, overseen by an independent federal monitor, with specific required reforms and deadlines. Think of it as court-ordered rehab for a police department.

Three cases show the range of what happens next.

Seattle - the completed success. DOJ filed its complaint in July 2012, finding a pattern of excessive force and Fourth Amendment violations. The resulting consent decree overhauled use of force, crisis intervention, stops, crowd control, and supervision. In September 2025, after thirteen years, a federal judge ended the decree. The Justice Department called it a successful completion, saying the reforms had transformed the department into an example for other police forces. Thirteen years is a long time - but the department that emerged is measurably different from the one that entered.

New Orleans - the other completed success. DOJ’s investigation began in May 2010; its report found patterns of excessive force, unconstitutional stops, searches and arrests, and discriminatory policing. The consent decree was entered in 2013. In 2025, the federal court terminated the decree after approving a sustainment plan. Two major American police departments, both put under federal oversight for serious constitutional violations, both eventually reformed enough to earn their way out.

Ferguson - the slow one. DOJ opened its investigation in September 2014, after the shooting of Michael Brown. Its March 2015 findings were damning: police and municipal court practices that systematically violated the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments, enforcement unduly focused on generating revenue, practices that reflected and worsened racial bias. The consent decree was approved and entered in April 2016. But implementation missed early deadlines, and progress has been slow and incremental. Ferguson is the honest counterweight: a consent decree is a tool, not a miracle. It works when local leadership cooperates and sustains the effort

over years. It stalls when they do not.

The bottom line: consent decrees are a real, documented federal accountability tool with two recent completed successes and one slow-moving case. That is case evidence, not experimental proof - but it is real.

Georgia POST: The License to Police

Here is an accountability lever most Georgians have never heard of: the state can take an officer's certification away.

The Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training Council - Georgia POST - certifies every peace officer in the state. You cannot work as a sworn officer in Georgia without its certification. Since January 1, 2022, that certification is indefinite once earned - there is no more periodic recertification - but officers must complete 20 hours of training every year, maintain firearms qualification, and complete mandated training topics.

POST has an investigations division, and it has teeth. It investigates involuntary terminations, suspensions over 30 days, and alleged criminal involvement by officers. And agencies do not get to stay quiet: departments must report officer arrests, indictments, convictions, 30-day suspensions, and demotions to POST within 15 days.

Under state law - O.C.G.A. Section 35-8-7.1 - POST can refuse, suspend, or revoke an officer's certification. The grounds, drawn from POST's Code of Ethics, are specific and worth knowing, because they define the state's own red lines:

1. Felony conviction, guilty or nolo contendere plea, or any crime of moral turpitude
2. Unlawful use of a controlled substance
3. Excessive or unwarranted use of force
4. Dangerous or unsafe practices with firearms, weapons, or vehicles showing willful or wanton disregard for safety
5. Physical or psychological abuse of the public or prisoners
6. Domestic violence
7. Misrepresentation of employment information 8 through 10. Willfully making false or misleading statements to law enforcement, to courts, or on official documents

Notice what is on that list: lying. Three of the ten grounds involve false statements. The state of Georgia has decided, in writing, that a dishonest officer is an uncertifiable officer. And decertification has a consequence no local chief can undo: a decertified officer cannot simply move to the next county and get hired. The license is gone statewide.

This is one of the most underappreciated accountability tools in Georgia. It does not depend on a chief's courage or a board's persuasion. It is the state saying: meet this standard, or you do not police here.

Body Cameras: What They Do and Do Not Do

Body-worn cameras are now one of the most visible accountability tools in policing - literally. Atlanta expanded its camera policy so that basically anyone doing enforcement daily must wear one, issuing roughly 1,200 cameras. The department even pulled its officers from federal task forces with the FBI, DEA, and U.S. Marshals because those agencies would not allow body cameras - a decision driven by the January 2019 shooting of Jimmy Atchison by an Atlanta officer serving on an FBI task force without a camera, in an incident where no gun was recovered.

So what do cameras actually accomplish? Let us be precise, because the claims often outrun the evidence.

What they do: they create a record. Complaint investigations - including the ACRB's - now routinely review body-camera and dash-camera footage. That changes the old dynamic where a complaint came down to the officer's word against the resident's. Footage does not resolve everything, but it resolves some things, and its mere existence changes behavior on both sides of the lens. Departments also use footage for training - showing recruits what good encounters look like, not just what violations look like.

What they do not do: cameras do not interpret themselves. A camera shows a angle, not the whole truth - what happened before the camera turned on, what the officer perceived, what is outside the frame. Footage can be inconclusive, and inconclusive footage gets interpreted through whatever people already believed. Cameras also depend on policy: when they must be on, when they can be off, who can watch the footage, how long it is kept, and what happens when an officer "forgets" to activate. A camera program with weak activation rules is theater.

The honest summary: body cameras are a valuable accountability tool whose value depends entirely on the policies around them. They are evidence infrastructure, not justice by themselves.

Early-Intervention Systems: Catching Problems Early

One more piece of machinery deserves mention: early-intervention systems. These are data systems departments use to flag officers whose patterns - complaints, use-of-force incidents, pursuits, sick leave, even commendations dropping off - suggest they may be heading toward a serious problem.

The idea is simple and humane: intervene before the crisis, not after it. A flagged officer might get counseling, retraining, a temporary reassignment, or closer supervision - not punishment, but help. A small percentage of officers account for a disproportionate share of complaints and force incidents in just about every department studied. Finding those officers early protects the public and can save the officer's career.

The honest caveat: the research file for this book did not contain rigorous studies proving these systems reduce misconduct on their own. They are a promising practice - widely recommended, logically sound, and only as good as the department's willingness to act on what the data shows. A system that flags problems nobody follows up on is just a spreadsheet.

If It Happens to You: Where to File

Accountability machinery only works if people use it. Here, in one place, are the channels available in Georgia - practical information, not legal advice.

Inside the department: The Atlanta Police Department's Office of Professional Standards - its internal affairs division - investigates misconduct complaints. You can file at the OPS office (185 Ted Turner Drive SW, Atlanta, GA 30303), at any APD precinct or work site, or online. The phone number is (404) 546-5945. OPS investigators take statements, review camera footage, and recommend discipline from reprimand up to dismissal when complaints are sustained.

Independent review: The Atlanta Citizen Review Board, described above - file within 365 days, online, by phone, by mail, by email, or walk in.

Officer-involved shootings: The Georgia Bureau of Investigation investigates officer-involved shootings at the request of the local agency, conducting an independent investigation and handing the file to the local district attorney for review. This is standard practice across Georgia.

State certification: Complaints about serious officer misconduct can also reach Georgia POST, which as described above can suspend or revoke the officer's statewide certification.

Federal civil rights: The DOJ Civil Rights Division investigates law enforcement misconduct - most often excessive force, but also sexual misconduct, theft, false arrest, and deliberate indifference to serious medical needs. You can report through the DOJ Civil Rights complaint portal at civilrights.justice.gov, by email, or through your local FBI field office.

On the scene, in the moment: Do not resist, argue, or obstruct - even if you believe your rights are being violated. Keep your hands visible. Stay calm. Remember details: names, badge numbers, what was said, witnesses. If it is safe, record. The encounter is not the place to win the argument. The complaint process afterward is.

The Standard Worth Holding

Accountability is not about assuming the worst of police. It is about building systems that assume something simpler: that power needs checking, in every profession, as a matter of course.

Review boards. Federal pattern-or-practice enforcement. State decertification. Body cameras with real policies behind them. Early-intervention systems that catch trouble before it becomes tragedy. Complaint channels that real people can actually use.

None of these is perfect. Atlanta's own review board went four years without opening a deadly-force investigation until a newspaper exposed the gap. Ferguson's consent decree is still grinding along. But Seattle and New Orleans show that sustained oversight can transform departments. Georgia's POST system shows that a state can draw hard lines around honesty and force. And every one of these systems works better when the community knows it exists and uses it.

Good officers want bad ones gone. Accountability is how that happens. It is not anti-police. It is pro-policing - the kind of policing a community can trust.

BEYOND THE BADGE: ALTERNATIVES AND YOUTH

Not Every 911 Call Needs a Badge and a Gun

Think about what we ask police officers to do. In a single shift, the same officer might respond to a burglary, a traffic crash, a domestic dispute, a person in psychiatric crisis on a bridge, an overdose, a noise complaint, and a lost child. We have made the police the default answer to almost every problem a community has - including problems that have nothing to do with crime.

That is not fair to officers, and it is not good for communities. A person having a mental health crisis does not need an armed response; they need a counselor. A teenager acting out does not need handcuffs; they need a mentor. An unhoused person sleeping on a bench does not need to be moved along; they need services.

This chapter is about what happens when communities build responses that do not start with law enforcement - and about how police and young people can meet each other as human beings before they meet in a crisis. As with everything in this book, we will lead with what the research actually shows, including where the evidence is thin. Hopeful, but honest.

Mental Health Calls: The Case for a Different Response

A large share of police calls for service involve mental health crises, substance use, or homelessness - situations where the presence of armed officers can escalate fear and where officers themselves will tell you they are not the right tool. The question communities across the country have been asking is simple: what if someone else answered those calls?

Two models have the best evidence. One is nearly forty years old. The other is brand new. Both point in the same direction.

CAHOOTS: The Original

In Eugene, Oregon, the answer has existed since 1989. CAHOOTS - Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets - was founded by the Eugene Police Department itself, in partnership with the White Bird Clinic. The model is simple: a crisis worker and an EMT or paramedic respond to mental-health-related 911 calls. No police. No weapons. Just people trained to de-escalate and connect.

The numbers are striking. In 2017, CAHOOTS diverted an estimated 17 percent of Eugene's roughly 130,000 calls for service - calls that would otherwise have gone to police. And a 2026 quasi-experimental study published in Science Advances, by Burton and colleagues, put rigorous measurement behind the model: depending on how you count, CAHOOTS diverted between 18 percent (substitution rate) and 23 percent (prevention-adjusted) of relevant calls - and for calls that either agency could have answered, the diversion rate was roughly 45 to 50 percent. Nearly half. Police backup was needed in only about 2 percent of CAHOOTS-only calls.

Read that last number again. In 98 percent of the mental-health calls CAHOOTS handled alone, no police were needed at all. The police department that created the program will tell you: it works, and it frees officers to do police work.

Denver STAR: The Modern Pilot

Denver built its version in 2020: STAR, the Support Team Assisted Response program. The pilot started small - 748 calls in its first six months, diverting roughly 3 percent of 911 calls in the pilot area. But it grew. By 2023, STAR was responding to more than 6,000 calls per year. The city's interim evaluation, covering June 2020 through December 2023, documented 6,700 clinical encounters with 4,435 distinct individuals. At full implementation, the program averaged 319 clinical encounters a month, and more than three-quarters of the people served identified mental health as a priority need.

Now the honest scale check, because it matters: even at full implementation, STAR was handling only about 1 percent of Denver's total 911 call volume as of 2024. That is not a criticism of the program - it is a new program doing exactly what pilots do, growing carefully. But it is a reminder that alternative response is a complement to policing, not a replacement for it. One percent of calls handled with care and expertise is thousands of human beings who got help instead of handcuffs. That counts. It just does not, by itself, transform a city's relationship with its police.

The research bottom line on alternative response: diversion is well measured and the science is solid. Broader claims - that these programs reduce crime citywide or transform trust on their own - remain thin. As AP reporting noted in 2023, there is no aggregate, comprehensive data yet on the programs' long-term effects. Promising and growing is the honest grade.

Georgia Is Building Its Own

This is not just a West Coast story. Georgia has been building co-responder models - pairing mental health professionals with police response - for years.

DeKalb County has run a co-responder program since the 1990s. Brookhaven, Gainesville, Forsyth County, LaGrange, Athens-Clarke County, Savannah, and Albany all operate versions of the model. Cobb County created two co-response teams in 2019. And in 2022, the state legislature passed SB 403, effective July 1 of that year, requiring Georgia's 22 community service boards to establish co-responder programs. That is state law now: every region of Georgia is supposed to have mental health professionals working alongside law enforcement on crisis calls.

The direction is clear. The infrastructure is being built. The question for communities is whether these programs get funded, staffed, and sustained - or whether they become another good idea that withers.

988, 211, and Atlanta's PAD: Numbers Worth Knowing

Beyond formal programs, there are three numbers every Georgian should know - because each one is a door that does not lead to a police encounter.

988. The national Suicide and Crisis Lifeline launched on July 16, 2022. Call, text, or chat 988, any hour of any day, and you reach crisis counselors - free, confidential, 24/7/365 - for mental health crises, substance use crises, and suicide prevention. In Georgia, 988 calls, texts, and chats are answered by the Georgia Crisis and Access Line. This is the critical distinction: 988 connects you to counselors, not to police dispatch. If someone you love is in crisis, 988 is the number that gets them help without an armed response.

211. The United Way's 2-1-1 line is the non-emergency counterpart: free, confidential information and referral for housing, food, health care, mental health services, employment, childcare, and transportation - 24 hours a day, every day. Here is a point of Georgia pride: United Way of Greater Atlanta's 2-1-1 was the first such line in the entire nation, and it marked 20 years of service in 2017, with more than 5,000 resources in its regional database. When the problem is "we need help" rather than "there is an emergency," 211 is the call.

PAD. Atlanta's Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative is a local nonprofit offering exactly what its name says: an alternative to police response, and diversion from jail, for people experiencing extreme poverty, substance use, or mental health concerns. Residents can request PAD through ATL311 - dial 311, or 404-546-0311. PAD's community response teams come to the scene offering food, water, hygiene supplies, referrals, and transportation. The organization also provides pre-arrest diversion - APD officers citywide can divert someone to PAD instead of booking them - and long-term case management. Pre-arrest diversion has been expanding since 2020, community referrals through ATL311 were added in 2021, and in 2025 the city and Fulton County opened the Center for Diversion and Services, a 24/7 law-enforcement drop-off point for pre-arrest diversion.

Know these numbers. Share them. They are infrastructure for a different kind of response.

Police Athletic League: Promising, Not Proven

Now to young people - because the relationship between police and community is largely decided before anyone is an adult. A teenager's first dozen interactions with police shape a lifetime of attitudes. So what happens when those interactions are a basketball league instead of a stop-and-frisk?

The Police Athletic League model - officers coaching, mentoring, and running programs for youth - feels like it should work. And the self-reported signs are encouraging. In Philadelphia, 96 percent of PAL youth participants agreed the program helped them complete more homework. In Montgomery County, Maryland, a first-year evaluation found improved grades and decreased self-reported alcohol, tobacco, and drug use among participants.

But here is the honest evidence grade, and it matters: thin. An East Carolina University thesis on PAL found there is "very little research on programs run under the Police Athletic League model."

The encouraging numbers above are program self-reports, not controlled studies. There is no rigorous experimental evidence base for PAL specifically. That does not mean PAL does not work - it means we do not know with scientific confidence, and anyone who tells you otherwise is overselling.

Atlanta's own PAL is well established: founded in 1983 as a partnership between the police department, neighborhood planning units, community investors, and business associations, operating as a nonprofit serving youth ages 8 to 18 - more than 2,800 young people a year - with summer camps, athletic leagues, after-school programs, tutoring, and mentoring at two inner-city facilities. That is real infrastructure, serving real kids, every year. The honest thing to say about it is: promising, worth supporting, worth studying properly.

Restorative Justice: The Strongest Evidence in the Chapter

If PAL is the thinnest evidence in this chapter, restorative justice is the strongest - with one important qualification.

Restorative justice brings together the person who caused harm, the person harmed, and the community to repair what was broken - instead of, or alongside, pure punishment. And the evidence that it reduces reoffending is genuinely strong. A Cambridge and Sheffield evaluation of seven experiments, covering roughly 400 cases, found that restorative justice conferences reduced the frequency of reconviction by an average of 27 percent. A 2003 meta-analysis by Nugent and Umbreit, covering 19 juvenile victim-offender mediation sites and 9,307 young people, found a 26 percent reduction in recidivism. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy concluded in 2013 that victim-offender mediation was the only restorative practice with enough evidence to be rated evidence-based for juvenile offenders - with an 89 percent chance of returning net positive monetary value.

That is a strong evidence base by the standards of criminal justice research. Here is the qualification: most of that evidence is about restorative justice generally, not about police-youth dialogue programs specifically. The evidence that police-led youth dialogues build trust is thinner - though a 2021 study by Payne and colleagues in Gloucestershire, England, found that restorative programs built on police-young person interactions significantly improved procedural justice and relationships. Promising, and pointed in the right direction, but thinner than the recidivism findings.

The takeaway: when young people who have caused harm sit down with the people they harmed and work to make it right, reoffending drops by roughly a quarter. That is one of the most powerful findings in this entire book. Communities and departments looking for youth programs with real evidence should start here.

Foot Patrol: Presence Is Not Enough

What about the simplest idea of all - officers walking the beat, visible in the neighborhood, talking to people? The evidence here is a lesson in the difference between presence and engagement.

The early findings were encouraging. The Newark Foot Patrol Experiment in 1981 and the Flint Neighborhood Foot Patrol in 1982 both found that foot patrol reduced fear of crime - people felt safer seeing officers on foot in their neighborhoods. British neighborhood-policing pilots in 2006 found that targeted foot patrol improved public confidence, perceptions of crime, and feelings of safety - and even reduced crime - when it was implemented alongside community engagement and problem-solving.

That last clause is doing all the work. A follow-up analysis found that without genuine engagement, foot patrol alone was probably not enough. And the Philadelphia Policing Tactics Experiment found that foot patrol at violent-crime hot spots produced no measurable change in residents' perceptions at all - neither harm nor benefit. The National Research Council's review classified foot patrol's effect on fear of crime as supported by only weak-to-moderate evidence.

So the honest summary: foot patrol works as a trust tool only when officers use the time for real human contact - conversations, problem-solving, relationship-building - not just visibility. An officer walking past people is presence. An officer who knows the shop owners, the kids, the grandmothers on the porch - that is engagement. The research says only the second one builds trust.

What Officers Themselves Say

Here is a detail worth sitting with: CAHOOTS was founded by the Eugene Police Department. Not imposed on it. Founded by it.

That surprises people who assume alternative response is something activists force on unwilling police. In reality, many officers are the strongest supporters of these programs - because they know better than anyone how badly they are suited to some of the calls they answer. Ask a patrol officer whether they would rather handle a burglary investigation or talk someone off a ledge with no mental health training, and most will pick the burglary. Not because they do not care, but because they know their limits.

This matters for the politics of building these programs. Alternative response is not anti-police. It is pro-officer: it takes impossible jobs off their plate and lets them focus on the work they were actually trained to do. When a CAHOOTS team handles a crisis call, that is two officers freed up for the calls only police can answer. Denver's program was built with the same logic. Georgia's SB 403 co-responder requirement passed a Republican legislature with law enforcement at the table.

The officers who resist alternative response usually have one of two concerns, and both deserve honest answers. The first is safety: what if the crisis team walks into a dangerous situation? The CAHOOTS answer is the 2 percent backup figure - in 98 percent of solo calls, no police were needed, and in the other 2 percent, police came. The model does not pretend danger never exists. It just measures how often it actually does. The second concern is liability: who is responsible if something goes wrong? That is a real policy question, and the programs that last are the ones that answer it in writing - clear protocols for when teams call for backup, clear lines of responsibility, real training. Vague programs fail. Well-designed ones endure.

What You Can Do

This chapter has been about programs. Here is the part about power - yours.

These programs do not appear by themselves. CAHOOTS exists because Eugene built it. Denver STAR exists because Denver funded it. Georgia's co-responder law exists because legislators passed it. Atlanta's PAD exists because organizers and the city built it together. Every one of them started with residents saying: we want a different response, and we will show up until we get it.

If you want these programs in your community, here is what actually moves the needle:

Show up where budgets are decided. Programs live or die in city and county budgets. In Atlanta, that means city council budget hearings. Police departments do not decide to fund alternative response on their own - elected officials allocate the money, usually after residents demand it repeatedly, in public, on the record.

Use the channels that exist. Atlanta's Neighborhood Planning Unit system gives residents a formal voice - police commanders attend NPU meetings, and those meetings are where community priorities get documented. Go. Speak. Bring neighbors. A room full of residents asking for co-responder expansion is harder to ignore than a single email.

Know the numbers and share them. 988. 211. 311 for PAD in Atlanta. Every person who learns these numbers is one less unnecessary police encounter. Put them in your phone. Put them on your refrigerator. Tell your block.

Support the youth programs with your time, not just your approval. PAL leagues need coaches. Restorative justice programs need trained facilitators and community volunteers. Mentoring a teenager takes a few hours a week and changes the trajectory of that teenager's every future police encounter - because the kid who knows officers as coaches does not see only uniforms.

Demand the evidence follow the money. When your city funds a new program, ask for the evaluation. How many calls diverted? What were the outcomes? The programs in this chapter that earned our trust earned it with data - CAHOOTS with its diversion rates, ICAT with its randomized trials. Insist that new programs measure and publish their results. That is how promising becomes proven.

No Single Program Fixes Trust

Here is where the chapter lands, and where the book's third part ends.

There is no single program - no training, no board, no alternative-response team, no youth league - that fixes the relationship between law enforcement and the community by itself. Anyone selling you that is selling something.

What the research actually shows is a combination, sustained over years:

Procedural justice in every encounter - the four pillars, practiced thousands of times a day - with the experimental evidence to back it: 14 percent less crime, 10 percent fewer complaints, 6.4 percent less force. De-escalation training that actually works - ICAT's 28 percent fewer force incidents, 26 percent fewer citizen injuries, 36 percent fewer officer injuries - refreshed and reinforced, not delivered once and forgotten. Accountability machinery with real teeth - review boards with subpoena power, federal oversight when departments fail systemically, state decertification for the officers who should not wear the badge. Alternative responses for the calls that never needed police - CAHOOTS diverting nearly half of eligible calls with backup needed 2 percent of the time, 988 counselors instead of dispatchers, PAD teams instead of bookings. Youth programs - restorative justice cutting reoffending by more than a quarter, PAL leagues building relationships one practice at a time, foot patrols where officers actually know people's names.

None of these is the answer. All of them together, sustained over years, is the closest thing to an answer the research has found.

Trust is not a program. It is a practice. It is built the way the last two chapters described: fairly, accountably, encounter by encounter, year after year. The science tells us what works. The only remaining question is whether we will do it - all of it, for as long as it takes.

CHAPTER 9: Know Your Rights in Georgia

Read this first: This chapter is *education, not legal advice*. It explains general principles of the law as they stood when this book was written. Laws change, court rulings shift, and your situation may have details that matter. If you need legal advice about something that happened to you, talk to a Georgia-licensed attorney. We'll say it again at the end of the chapter, because it matters that much.

Now let's get into it.

The One Rule That Rules Them All: Comply, Then Complain

Before we talk about any specific right, you need the principle that sits underneath all of them:

The street is not the courtroom.

If you believe an officer is violating your rights during an encounter, the worst place to fight that battle is on the side of the road. Arguing, resisting, or obstructing on the scene can turn a situation you would have *won* later into charges you *can't* beat now – obstruction, resisting arrest, disorderly conduct. Officers have wide authority in the moment. Judges have wide authority afterward.

So the rule is simple:

- **Comply** in the moment. Stay calm. Stay polite. Do what you're told unless it would put you in physical danger.
- **Complain** afterward. Document everything. File the complaint. Call a lawyer. That is where rights get enforced – in courtrooms and review boards, not on street corners.

This isn't about bowing down. It's about strategy. Every civil rights lawyer in Georgia will tell you the same thing: the people who win cases are the people who survived the encounter and documented it.

Traffic Stops: The Most Common Encounter

Most people who get stopped by police get stopped in a car. Here's what Georgia law actually says.

What you must do

Under **O.C.G.A. 40-5-29**, a driver who is stopped **must display their driver's license when an officer demands it**. Officers will typically ask for three things: license, registration, and proof of insurance. Have them ready or know where they are.

How to handle it (practical guidance, not law)

- Turn off the car. Turn on the interior light if it's dark.
- Keep your hands visible – on the steering wheel is best.
- Stay in the car unless the officer tells you to get out. (Officers may lawfully order a driver out of the vehicle during a valid stop – *Pennsylvania v. Mimms*.)
- Avoid sudden movements. Tell the officer what you're doing before you do it: "My registration is in the glove box, I'm going to reach for it."
- Be polite. Not because you have to perform respect – because calm encounters end faster and safer.

Can you ask for a supervisor?

You can ask. But there is **no general constitutional right** that requires the officer to summon one or to stop what they're doing until one arrives. Asking is fine; demanding one and refusing to cooperate until they show up is a losing strategy. (Reporting from NowGeorgia, 2026.)

Questions during the stop

Georgia courts hold that officers may ask questions unrelated to the purpose of the stop **so long as** they don't prolong the stop beyond the time reasonably required to complete its mission (*Flores v. State*, Ga. App. 2018). You have **no legal obligation to answer questions that could incriminate you**. "Where are you coming from?" "Where are you headed?" – you're allowed to answer politely, and you're also allowed to say, calmly, "I'd prefer not to answer that."

Georgia's hands-free law

Since **July 1, 2018**, Georgia's Hands-Free Georgia Act (**O.C.G.A. 40-6-241(c)**) has prohibited holding or supporting a phone with any part of your body while driving. That means no texting, no scrolling, no watching video. Hands-free calls (Bluetooth, earpiece), voice-to-text, mounted GPS, and continuously running dash cameras are allowed. The law applies even at red lights – only a lawfully parked vehicle is outside it. Penalties escalate: a first offense is \$50 plus a point on your license; repeat offenses get steeper. There are narrow exceptions for reporting a crash, a medical emergency, a fire, or a crime.

Quick traffic-stop checklist:

- ☐ Car off, hands on the wheel, interior light on at night
- ☐ License, registration, insurance ready – announce your movements
- ☐ Stay calm, stay polite, no sudden moves
- ☐ If you believe your rights are violated: comply in the moment, document everything after

Street Stops: The Terry Standard

Not every police encounter happens in a car. Officers also stop people on foot. The law for that comes from a 1968 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Terry v. Ohio*:

An officer may **briefly stop and question a person without probable cause**, so long as the officer has “**reasonable suspicion**” – based on specific and articulable facts, not just a hunch – that the person has committed, is committing, or is about to commit a crime. If the officer also has reasonable suspicion the person is **armed and presently dangerous**, a limited pat-down of the person's outer clothing for weapons is permitted.

Two things to take from this:

1. **Reasonable suspicion is a lower bar than probable cause.** Probable cause is what officers need for an arrest or a warrant. Reasonable suspicion is less than that – but it still has to be based on real, specific facts, not a feeling.
2. **A Terry stop is supposed to be brief.** It's an investigatory detention, not an arrest. It has a limited scope and a limited duration.

In plain language: an officer can't just stop you because they feel like it, but they can stop you briefly if they can point to specific reasons. And you are allowed to ask – politely – “Am I free to leave?” If the answer is yes, you can walk away calmly.

Searches: What Officers Can and Can't Do

This is the area where knowing your rights matters most, because searches happen fast and confusion helps no one.

Consent searches – you can say no

You have the right to refuse to consent to a search of yourself, your car, or your home.

Say it clearly and politely: “I do not consent to any searches.” That's it. Your refusal **cannot be used as evidence of guilt**.

One critical follow-through: if officers search anyway after you've refused, **do not physically obstruct them**. That turns into an obstruction charge. Refusing consent verbally preserves your ability to challenge the search later in court – that's where the fight happens. (ACLU of Southern California, 2026.)

Vehicle searches after an arrest

In *Arizona v. Gant* (2009), the Supreme Court limited when police can search a vehicle after arresting someone who was in it. Officers may search the vehicle **only if** the arrested person is still within reaching distance of the passenger compartment **or** it's reasonable to believe the vehicle contains evidence of the offense of the arrest. An arrest for a suspended license doesn't automatically open your whole car to a search.

Plain view

Under *Horton v. California* (1990), an officer may seize evidence in plain view without a warrant when three things are true: the officer is lawfully where the evidence can be seen, the officer has lawful access to the object, and its incriminating character is immediately apparent. Translation: what's sitting on your passenger seat in the open is fair game. Keep your car clean and your business private.

Probable cause

Beyond consent, officers may search a vehicle with **probable cause** – for example, visible contraband or the smell of illegal substances – or with a warrant. This is another reason the calm, clean, organized car matters: it gives officers nothing to work with.

Recording Police in Public: Yes, You Can

This one surprises people, so let's be clear.

Georgia is a one-party consent state for audio recording (O.C.G.A. 16-11-66(a)). That means any participant in a conversation can record it without telling the others. (Video in a private place out of public view is different – that requires all-party consent under O.C.G.A. 16-11-62(2). Video in public is generally permitted.)

And specifically for police: in the Eleventh Circuit – which covers Georgia – ***Smith v. City of Cumming* (11th Cir. 2000)** recognizes a **First Amendment right to record police officers performing their public duties in public.**

So yes: you can record. A few practical notes:

- Record openly, not sneakily. Hold the phone where it's visible.
- Don't let recording become interfering. You have a right to record; you don't have a right to get in an officer's face or physically obstruct them while doing it. Keep your distance.
- If an officer orders you to stop recording or to hand over your phone, comply in the moment – and document it. That's a "complain later" situation, and courts have been very interested in cases where recording was suppressed.
- Back up your footage. Upload it to cloud storage as soon as you safely can.

Miranda: What It Is and Isn't

You've heard it on every cop show: "You have the right to remain silent." Here's what *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) actually requires.

Miranda warnings are required before **custodial interrogation** – meaning **custody** (you're arrested or restrained as if arrested) **plus** questioning by known law enforcement officers. A training formula puts it simply: **cops + custody + interrogation = Miranda**. If any piece is missing, warnings aren't required – for example, casual conversation during a consensual encounter, routine booking questions, or ordinary traffic-stop questioning.

Two things most people get wrong:

1. **Not every encounter requires Miranda.** If you're not in custody, officers can ask you questions without reading you your rights, and your answers can still be used.
2. **Just staying silent isn't enough to invoke the right.** Under *Berghuis v. Thompkins*, you have to **say it clearly and out loud**: "I'm invoking my right to remain silent." Then stop talking. Talking after invoking can undo the invocation.

If You Believe Your Rights Were Violated

Let's put it all together. Something went wrong. You believe an officer crossed the line. Here's your playbook – practical steps, not legal advice:

1. **In the moment:** Do not resist, argue, or obstruct – even if you're innocent, even if you're sure the officer is wrong. Keep your hands visible. Stay calm and polite. Survive the encounter.
2. **As soon as it's safe:** Write down everything. Officers' names and badge numbers. What was said, by whom, in what order. Whether you consented to anything. What was searched or seized. The exact time and location.
3. **Witnesses:** Get names and phone numbers of anyone who saw what happened. Independent witnesses are gold.
4. **Evidence:** Save your recording. Photograph any injuries. Keep every piece of paper – citations, tow slips, property receipts.
5. **Afterward:** File a written complaint (the next chapter walks you through exactly how, in Georgia). You can also contact your local ACLU chapter. If there's a real case there, talk to a civil rights attorney – many offer free consultations.

The pattern is always the same: **comply in the moment, document everything, complain afterward.** The street is not the courtroom. But the courtroom is real, and it works for people who bring it facts.

Your Words in the Moment: Sample Scripts

Knowing your rights in theory is one thing. Having the actual words ready when your heart is pounding is another. Rehearse these until they're automatic – calm, short, respectful:

- **When you want to know if you're detained:** "Officer, am I free to leave?" If yes: "Thank you, I'll be on my way," then leave calmly. If no: "I understand. I'm going to remain silent."
- **When you want to stop answering questions:** "I'm invoking my right to remain silent." Say it once, clearly, out loud. Then stop talking – small talk after invoking can undo it.
- **When asked to consent to a search:** "I do not consent to any searches." Polite. Final. Don't argue about it further.
- **When you want the officer's information:** "Could I please have your name and badge number?" Ask calmly, once. If refused, note the refusal – it matters later.
- **When you want to record:** Don't announce a legal lecture. Just hold the phone openly and keep your distance. If ordered to stop: comply in the moment, document afterward.

Notice what's missing from every script: attitude, legal threats, and lectures about the Constitution. The goal in the moment is never to win the argument. It's to protect your rights *and* get home safe.

Myths vs. Facts

A lot of what people "know" about their rights comes from movies, social media, or jailhouse lawyers. Let's clear up the big ones:

- **Myth:** "If they didn't read me my rights, the whole case gets thrown out." **Fact:** Miranda warnings are only required before *custodial interrogation*. Plenty of lawful arrests happen without Miranda ever being read, because no interrogation occurred. It matters – but it's narrower than people think.

- **Myth:** “I can demand a supervisor and everything stops until they arrive.” **Fact:** You can ask for a supervisor, but there’s no general right requiring the officer to pause or summon one. Ask once, politely – then comply.
- **Myth:** “If the search was illegal, I can physically stop it.” **Fact:** No. Never physically resist a search, even an unlawful one. State your refusal clearly, then challenge it in court – where illegal searches actually get evidence thrown out.
- **Myth:** “Passengers have no rights during a traffic stop.” **Fact:** Passengers have the same core rights – to remain silent, to refuse consent to searches of their person and property, to ask if they’re free to leave. The driver is the subject of the stop; passengers are along for it, and their rights travel with them.
- **Myth:** “Recording the police is illegal / they’ll take my phone.” **Fact:** In Georgia, you have a recognized First Amendment right to record officers performing public duties in public (*Smith v. City of Cumming*, 11th Cir. 2000), and Georgia is a one-party consent state for audio. Record openly, from a distance, without interfering.

Teach Your Kids This Chapter

If you’re a parent, don’t wait for your teenager’s first traffic stop to be the lesson. Walk them through it at the kitchen table:

1. Hands visible, car off, interior light on.
2. “Yes sir / no sir.” Polite, always.
3. Tell the officer before you reach for anything.
4. “Am I free to leave?” and “I don’t consent to searches” – teach them the sentences, not just the concepts.
5. Comply in the moment. Tell *you* everything afterward.

A kid who knows the script is a kid who comes home. That’s what this chapter is really about.

Putting It Together: Two Scenarios

Scenario 1: The traffic stop. Blue lights behind you. You pull over safely, car off, hands on the wheel, interior light on. “Good evening, officer.” License, registration, insurance – you announce before reaching: “My insurance card is in the glove box, I’m going to get it.” The officer asks where you’re coming from. You answer politely, or you say “I’d prefer not to answer that.” The officer asks to search the car. “I do not consent to any searches.” The officer writes the ticket or gives a warning. You take the paper, you drive away, you go home. If something felt wrong, you write it all down within the hour.

Scenario 2: The street stop. An officer approaches you on foot and starts asking questions. You stay calm. “Am I free to leave, officer?” If yes, you walk away calmly – no running, no attitude. If no, you understand you’re being detained. You give your name if asked (in many encounters that’s the practical move), you say “I’m invoking my right to remain silent” if questioning continues, and you do not consent to any searches. You survive the encounter. You document everything after.

Neither scenario involves winning an argument on the street. Both involve going home with your rights intact and your record clean. That’s the win.

Your Rights Wallet Card

Copy this onto an index card. Keep it in your wallet. When the moment comes, you won’t have to remember – you’ll just have to read:

- Comply in the moment. Complain afterward.
 - “Am I free to leave?”
 - “I do not consent to any searches.”
 - “I’m invoking my right to remain silent.”
 - Get names, badge numbers, witnesses.
 - Record openly, from a distance.
 - Write everything down within 24 hours.
-

One more time, because it matters: This chapter is education, not legal advice. The law changes, court decisions shift the lines, and your specific situation may have details that change the answer. For advice about your own case, talk to a Georgia-licensed attorney. Knowing your rights is power – but knowing when to call a lawyer is wisdom.

CHAPTER 10: Engage – How to Be Heard

Knowing your rights is defense. This chapter is offense – how to use your voice, in the right rooms, through the right channels, so that what happened to you (or your neighbor, or your kid) actually leads to change.

A lot of people feel like complaining goes into a black hole. Sometimes it does. But Georgia has more accountability channels than most people realize, and there are ways to file, show up, and organize that genuinely move the needle. This chapter is the map.

Filing a Complaint in Georgia: The Channels

1. The department itself – APD’s Office of Professional Standards

Every police department has an internal-affairs function. In Atlanta, it’s the **Office of Professional Standards (OPS)** – the unit that investigates complaints of officer misconduct.

- **Where:** 185 Ted Turner Dr. SW, Atlanta, GA 30303
- **Phone:** (404) 546-5945
- **How:** Complaints can be submitted at the OPS office, at any APD precinct or work site, or online at AtlantaPD.org.

OPS handles everything from paperwork errors to excessive force. Investigators take statements, review body-camera and dash-camera footage, and recommend discipline – reprimand, suspension, demotion, or dismissal – when a complaint is sustained. Yes, it’s the department investigating itself, which is exactly why the next channel exists.

2. The independent check – Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB)

The **Atlanta Citizen Review Board** is the independent, citizen-run oversight agency for APD – and it exists because of a tragedy. It was established by city ordinance in **2007**, after the 2006 killing of Kathryn Johnston, and given **subpoena power** in May 2010.

Here’s what makes it different from OPS:

- **Independent.** It's not part of APD. It answers to citizens.
- **Real investigative power.** It can investigate, mediate, adjudicate, hold public hearings, issue public reports, and compel testimony and records with its subpoena power.
- **Broad jurisdiction.** Fourteen complaint categories: abusive language, false arrest, false imprisonment, harassment, excessive force, serious bodily injury, death by an officer, discrimination, abuse of authority, retaliation, failure to provide identification, and violations of standard operating procedure, among others.
- **Accessible.** It accepts anonymous complaints, and it can review serious-bodily-injury and death cases without a signature.

One important nuance: the board's power is **advisory**. It investigates and recommends discipline, training, and policy changes – including actions directed at individual officers – but it doesn't impose discipline itself. The police chief makes the final call. Still, a sustained finding from an independent board with subpoena power carries real weight, and its public reports create a record that can't be quietly buried.

Filing window: 365 days from the incident. Don't wait. Complaints can be filed online, by phone, mail, email, or walk-in at acrbgov.org.

How OPS and ACRB interact: they don't investigate at the same time. If the ACRB investigates first and sustains the complaint, OPS then opens its own independent investigation. If the ACRB doesn't sustain, OPS doesn't investigate. The two can reach different conclusions because they may apply different standards – so it's worth understanding both.

3. When it's criminal – the GBI

If you believe an officer committed a **crime** – not just a policy violation, but an actual crime – the **Georgia Bureau of Investigation** is the channel. The GBI investigates officer-involved shootings at the request of the local agency, conducts an independent investigation, and hands the case file to the local District Attorney for review. That's the standard process across Georgia.

4. When it's about the badge itself – Georgia POST

The **Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training Council (POST)** certifies every peace officer in Georgia. Its investigations division looks into involuntary terminations, long

suspensions, and alleged criminal involvement – and agencies are required to report arrests, indictments, convictions, and serious discipline to POST within 15 days.

Under **O.C.G.A. 35-8-7.1**, POST can suspend or revoke an officer's certification. The POST Code of Ethics lists what can cost an officer the badge: felony convictions, unlawful drug use, **excessive or unwarranted force**, dangerous practices with weapons showing willful disregard for safety, physical or psychological abuse of the public or prisoners, domestic violence, and lying – to law enforcement, to courts, or on official documents.

Why this matters to you: an officer who loses certification can't just get hired by the next county over. POST is the mechanism that keeps a bad officer from becoming someone else's problem.

5. When it's a pattern – the DOJ Civil Rights Division

The **U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division** investigates law-enforcement misconduct – most often alleged excessive force, but also sexual misconduct, theft, false arrest, and deliberate indifference to serious medical needs. You can report through the **DOJ Civil Rights complaint portal at civilrights.justice.gov**, by email to **CRMreferral@usdoj.gov**, or through your **local FBI field office** (tips.fbi.gov).

Written complaints go to: Civil Rights Division, Criminal Section, U.S. Department of Justice, P.O. Box 66018, Washington, D.C. 20035-6018. Include your name, address, and phone number; the agency involved; a description of what happened with dates and times; any injuries; the officers involved if you know them; and any other examples of similar misconduct.

The DOJ doesn't take every case – it focuses on the most serious and on patterns. But every complaint becomes part of the record, and patterns are built out of individual reports.

How to File a Complaint That Gets Taken Seriously

Here's the uncomfortable truth: vague complaints die. Specific complaints live. The difference isn't who you are – it's what you bring. Here's how to make yours count:

- [] **Write it down fast.** Memory fades. Write your account within 24 hours, while the details are sharp.

- [] **Lead with facts, not feelings.** “Officer Smith struck me twice in the ribs with his baton at approximately 9:40 PM” beats “the officer was brutal and disrespectful.” Feelings are real, but facts are what investigators act on.
- [] **Dates, times, locations.** Exact. Every time.
- [] **Names and badge numbers.** If you didn’t get them, describe the officers – and note that you asked and were refused, if that’s what happened. (Refusing to provide identification is itself one of the ACRB’s complaint categories.)
- [] **Witnesses.** Names and phone numbers. Tell the investigator they exist.
- [] **Evidence.** Mention your recording, photos of injuries, medical records, the citation number – and keep copies of everything you submit.
- [] **Keep a copy of the complaint itself.** Date-stamp it. If you file online, screenshot the confirmation.
- [] **Follow up.** Ask for a case number. Ask about timelines. Polite persistence signals that you’re not going away.

And one more thing: **tell the truth, the whole truth.** A complaint with one exaggerated detail gives an investigator a reason to doubt all of it. The facts, stated plainly, are always enough.

Constructive Channels: Beyond the Complaint

Filing a complaint is about what went wrong. But being heard also means showing up where decisions get made *before* things go wrong. Georgia – and Atlanta especially – has real doors for that. Walk through them.

Learn the system: the Citizens Police Academy

The **APD Citizens Police Academy** is a free, ~30-hour course (about 9-10 weeks) that teaches regular citizens how APD actually operates – department overview, use of force policy, the crime lab, SWAT, 911 operations, homicide investigations, traffic stops. It meets **Tuesday evenings, 6:00-9:00 PM**, at Atlanta Police Headquarters, 226 Peachtree St. SW.

Eligibility: metro Atlanta resident, **21 or older**, no felony convictions, no misdemeanor convictions within a year of applying, plus a background check. Contact: **Elizabeth Espy**,

enespy@atlantaga.gov, (404) 546-2541.

Why go? Because you can't argue with a system you don't understand – and because the officers who teach it meet *you*, a real neighbor, not an abstract “community.” That cuts both ways, and that's the point.

Know your zone, meet your commander

APD patrols **six zones (Zones 1-6)**, each with its own command structure, crime patterns, and community-policing staff – including a Crime Prevention Unit with inspectors assigned per zone, a Community Services Division, and a Director of Community Engagement and Events.

Find out which zone you live in. Learn your **zone commander's** name. Show up at the zone's community meetings. Commanders who see the same faces month after month – asking sharp, respectful, specific questions – start answering to those faces. That's not theory; that's how local power works.

The NPU system: Atlanta's hidden civic superpower

Here's something most Atlantans don't know they have: the **Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU)** system – 25 citizen advisory councils (A through Z) covering every neighborhood in the city. NPUs weigh in on zoning, licenses, and city policy, and **police commanders regularly attend NPU and neighborhood meetings.**

This is where a resident with a documented concern about, say, how traffic stops are conducted on their block can put it on the record in front of command staff, elected officials, and neighbors – all at once. If you want sustained influence over policing in your neighborhood, join your NPU. It's the most underused civic tool in Atlanta.

Town halls

APD leadership and city officials hold **public-safety town halls** – open forums where residents can raise concerns directly. Go. Bring neighbors. Bring specifics. A town hall with five residents is a formality; a town hall with fifty is a mandate.

Organizing Your Neighbors

Individual complaints matter. Organized neighbors change systems. Here's the starter kit:

- [] **Start a block club or safety group.** It doesn't need a charter – it needs a group chat and a regular meeting time. Neighbors who know each other watch out for each other, and they show up together.
- [] **Do safety walks.** Walk your block with neighbors – and invite your zone's community-policing officers to walk with you. It's hard to see a neighborhood as a problem when you're walking it with the people who live there.
- [] **Document patterns, not just incidents.** One bad stop is a complaint. Ten bad stops on the same block in three months is a *pattern* – and patterns are what get commanders, review boards, and the DOJ interested. Keep a shared log.
- [] **Build relationships with the good officers.** They're there. The officer who coaches at the rec center, who knows the kids by name, who de-escalates instead of dominating – know their name, thank them, say so publicly. Departments promote what communities reward.
- [] **Connect with existing organizations.** You don't have to build everything from scratch. Neighborhood associations, faith groups, the NPU, nonprofits like the Atlanta Police Athletic League (serving youth 8-18 since 1983) – plug into what's already moving.

When You Need Help, Not Police

Part of being heard is knowing which number to call. Not every crisis needs an armed response:

- **211** – United Way's free, confidential, 24/7 line for non-emergency social services: housing, food, health and mental-health care, employment, childcare, transportation. (United Way of Greater Atlanta's 2-1-1 was the nation's first.)
- **988** – the national Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call, text, or chat, 24/7, for mental-health, substance-use, and suicide crises. In Georgia, 988 calls are answered by the **Georgia Crisis and Access Line** – crisis counselors, not police dispatch.
- **311 / ATL311** – in Atlanta, non-emergency city services, including referral to the **Policing Alternatives and Diversion (PAD) Initiative**, whose community response teams offer an alternative to police response for people experiencing poverty, substance use, or mental-health crises. (Check current hours before relying on it – published hours have

varied.)

Calling the right number isn't just better for the person in crisis. It keeps a police encounter from happening in a situation where one was never the right tool – and every encounter that doesn't need to happen is one that can't go wrong.

Speaking Up in Public: The Two-Minute Comment

At some point you'll stand at a microphone – NPU meeting, city council, town hall – with two minutes and a room full of people. Here's how to make them count:

1. **Say who you are and where you live** (15 seconds). "My name is , *I live in* , I've been here ____ years." Local roots are credibility.
2. **State one specific problem** (30 seconds). Not "policing is broken" – "In the last three months, there have been four late-night traffic stops on my block that ended with cars searched and nothing found." Specific beats general every time.
3. **Bring the documentation** (30 seconds). "I have dates, times, and two witness statements." You don't have to read them all – just show they exist.
4. **Make one specific ask** (30 seconds). "I'm asking the zone commander to review stop data for our corridor and report back at next month's meeting." An ask with a deadline is accountability. A complaint without one is venting.
5. **Close with partnership** (15 seconds). "I want to work with this department. That's why I'm here instead of just being angry at home."

Write it down. Practice it. Bring neighbors who'll nod along – and one who'll speak after you saying "I agree, and here's what I saw." Two voices are a complaint. Five are a constituency.

Building a Coalition

One person is a story. A coalition is power. Here's how to build one without burning out:

- [] **Start with who you know.** Faith leaders, teachers, coaches, business owners, the NPU chair. Call five people. Ask each to call five more.

- [] **Give it a name and a regular time.** “The ____ Neighborhood Safety Coalition, first Tuesday of the month.” Regularity turns a moment into a movement.
- [] **Define the win.** “We want quarterly stop-data reports from our zone commander” is a win you can measure. “Better policing” isn’t. Pick something concrete, winnable, and public.
- [] **Document everything as a group.** A shared incident log – dates, times, locations, badge numbers, outcomes – maintained by the coalition becomes evidence no single complaint can match.
- [] **Celebrate progress publicly.** When the commander shows up with the data, say thank you – out loud, on the record. Coalitions that only criticize get tuned out. Coalitions that reward progress get results.

When the Channels Fail: The Escalation Ladder

Sometimes you do everything right and nothing changes. Don’t quit – escalate:

1. **Department level:** File with OPS. If unsatisfied, file with the ACRB (remember the 365-day window).
2. **City level:** Bring it to your city council member – in writing, with documentation. Council members control budgets, and budgets get attention.
3. **State level:** For criminal misconduct, the GBI. For certification issues, Georgia POST. Your state representative can also inquire on your behalf.
4. **Federal level:** The DOJ Civil Rights Division portal (civilrights.justice.gov) – especially when you can show a pattern, not just an incident.
5. **Public level:** Local media. Reporters cover documented patterns with named witnesses. Go to them with the file, not just the feelings.

Every step up the ladder should reference the steps below it: “I filed with OPS on this date, with the ACRB on this date, and wrote my council member on this date.” A paper trail of ignored complaints is itself a powerful document.

A Note on Tone: Furious and Effective

Let's be real: if you're reading this chapter, you might be angry. Maybe something happened to you or someone you love. Anger is fuel – but raw anger burns the engine. The most effective advocates in any city share one trait: they are **furious and disciplined at the same time**.

That means: document instead of venting. Ask specific questions instead of making speeches. Bring three neighbors instead of going alone. Thank the official who helps, even while you're pressing the one who won't. People in power can dismiss an angry person. They cannot dismiss an angry person with a file folder, a coalition, and a deadline.

Your anger is justified. Your discipline is what makes it dangerous – to the problem, not to you.

The Last Word: Accountability and Partnership Aren't Opposites

Some people hear “accountability” and think it means being anti-police. Some people hear “partnership” and think it means letting things slide. Both are wrong.

Accountability *is* partnership – the honest kind. The kind where you can say “that was wrong and here's the documentation” in one breath and “here's how we fix it together” in the next. The complaint and the NPU meeting. The review board and the safety walk. The insistence on rights and the respect for the badge.

You don't have to choose between demanding better and building better. The people who change policing in a city are the ones who do both – loudly, specifically, and together. Start this week: pick one channel from this chapter and use it.

CHAPTER 11: Serve – The Officer's Playbook

This chapter is written to you directly – the officer reading this book. Maybe a community member handed it to you. Maybe your department assigned it. Maybe you're just curious what the other side is saying.

Whatever brought you here: respect. You do one of the hardest jobs in America, and this chapter isn't a lecture. It's a playbook – practical, evidence-based, written peer-to-peer. The best officers in this country are already doing most of what's in here. This is about naming it, backing it with evidence, and making the case for why departments should back *you* when you do it.

First: The Realities You Carry

Before anything else, let's be honest about what the job costs – because any conversation about police and community that ignores the officer's reality isn't a serious conversation.

According to the FBI's 2024 Officers Killed and Assaulted report (released May 2025): **64 officers were feloniously killed** in the line of duty in 2024. **85,730 officers were assaulted** – a rate of **13.5 per 100 officers**, the highest officer-assault rate in ten years. About **457 officers were assaulted and injured by firearms**. The South saw 29 felonious deaths in 2024, a 45% increase over the year before.

And the staffing crisis is real. An **IACP survey of 1,158 agencies in 2024** found that **70% say hiring is harder now than five years ago**, and departments on average operate at just **91% of authorized strength** – roughly a 10% deficit. Fewer officers means slower response, less time for de-escalation, more burnout, more mistakes. As one state chiefs' association director put it, it leaves officers overburdened and burnout-prone.

So when this book talks about trust, it's not pretending your job is easy. It's saying: the officers who survive this job *well* – who go home safe, stay healthy, and still love the work after fifteen years – tend to be the ones who've figured out that community trust isn't soft. It's tactical. It's officer safety. It's the thing that makes the job survivable.

Procedural Justice: Four Habits, Every Encounter

There's a framework researchers call **procedural justice**, built by psychologist Tom Tyler, and it's the single most evidence-backed idea in modern policing. The core finding: **people care more about being treated fairly than about the outcome**. Fair procedures legitimize your decisions. Unfair ones poison everything – even when you were right.

The four pillars, translated into daily habits:

1. Voice – let people tell their side

Before you decide, listen. Thirty seconds of “tell me what happened” costs you nothing and buys you everything. People who feel heard comply more, complain less, and remember the encounter differently – even when the outcome goes against them.

2. Neutrality – same rules, everybody

Apply the rules consistently. Explain *why* you're doing what you're doing: “I'm asking everyone on this block the same questions tonight.” When people believe the decision was neutral rather than personal, resistance drops.

3. Respect – dignity is non-negotiable

Treat people with basic dignity – the way you'd want your own family treated in the same situation. This doesn't mean being soft. It means being professional. “Sir,” “ma'am,” eye contact, no contempt in your voice. Respect is free, and its absence is the thing people remember for years.

4. Trustworthiness – show you're trying to get it right

Signal that you're sincerely trying to do right by the community, not just rack up stats. Explain your reasoning. Admit what you don't know. “I don't have an answer on that yet, but I'll find out” builds more trust than bluffing ever will.

The evidence: A multicity randomized trial (Weisburd et al., published in *PNAS*, 2022) found that procedural-justice training produced a **14% relative decline in crime incidents** in the

trained hot spots – and residents were significantly less likely to see officers as harassing. In Chicago, daylong procedural-justice training for roughly 8,500 officers was associated with **10% fewer public complaints and 6.4% less use of force** (Wood et al., 2020).

Read that again: treating people fairly doesn't just feel better. It *reduces crime, reduces complaints, and reduces force*. That's not ideology. That's data.

De-escalation: A Skill, Not a Slogan

"De-escalation" gets thrown around as a buzzword. Let's talk about what actually works.

The **ICAT program** (Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics), developed by the Police Executive Research Forum, is the de-escalation training with the strongest experimental evidence in policing. A randomized controlled trial at the Louisville Metro Police Department (Engel et al., published in *Criminology & Public Policy*, 2022) found ICAT associated with **28% fewer use-of-force incidents, 26% fewer citizen injuries, and 36% fewer officer injuries**. An Indianapolis trial found a **20% reduction in use of force**. Note that last number: de-escalation training reduced *officer* injuries by more than a third. This protects you.

A few honest caveats, because a playbook should be straight with you:

- Training decays. In the Louisville study, 40% of officers said they needed refresher training. One-and-done doesn't hold – push your department for refreshers.
- Verbal-de-escalation-only training, without the tactical decision-making piece, hasn't shown force reduction. The program matters. ICAT works because it integrates communication *with* tactics and assessment.
- APD required ICAT for its officers, with most of the department trained by the end of October 2021. If your agency hasn't done it, that's a conversation worth having with your training division.

The deeper point: de-escalation isn't about being passive. It's about having more tools than force – so that force becomes the *last* option instead of the *first* reflex. The officers with the most tools are the safest officers.

Get Out of the Car: Community Immersion

Here's the simplest, oldest, most underused trust-builder in policing: **be present as a person, not just as a uniform.**

The research on foot patrol is conditional but instructive. Studies going back to the Newark Foot Patrol Experiment find that foot patrol reduces *fear* of crime – but the UK's College of Policing review concludes it builds trust **only when officers do positive informal contact and problem-solving, not just presence.** Walking the beat while staring at your phone does nothing. Walking it while learning names does everything.

What that looks like in practice:

- **Know your block.** The barbershop. The corner store owner. The pastors. The lady who's lived on the street for forty years and sees everything. These aren't "contacts" – they're relationships, and they're the best intelligence source you'll ever have.
- **Show up when nothing's wrong.** If the only time people see you is when someone's in trouble, you're a threat vector. Show up at the cookout. Coach, mentor, or just be present at youth programs – Atlanta's Police Athletic League has served kids ages 8-18 since 1983, and programs like it exist because officers showing up as *people* changes what kids believe a cop is.
- **Learn the history of the ground you're standing on.** If you patrol a neighborhood shaped by events like the ones in this book's history chapters, knowing that history isn't political – it's professional. You can't build trust with people whose story you don't know.

The community-policing model the DOJ's COPS Office has pushed since 1994 rests on three pillars: **community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational transformation.** The first two are yours, every shift. The third is your department's – and it's worth pushing for.

Handle the Complaint Like a Professional

Sooner or later, someone will file a complaint against you. Maybe it's justified. Maybe it isn't. Either way, here's the playbook:

1. **Don't take it personally – take it seriously.** A complaint is feedback. The officers with the fewest sustained complaints aren't the ones who never get complained on; they're the ones whose body-camera footage backs them up every time.

2. **Let the process work.** Atlanta's system – internal review through the Office of Professional Standards, independent review through the Citizen Review Board – exists to find the truth. Cooperate fully. The cover-up is always worse than the complaint.
3. **Learn from the unfounded ones too.** If someone felt mistreated enough to file, something in that encounter went sideways – even if you were within policy. Ask yourself what you'd do differently. That's not weakness; that's craft.
4. **Remember what the data says.** The Chicago procedural-justice training cut complaints by 10%. Fair encounters don't just feel better – they generate fewer complaints. The best complaint-reduction strategy is the way you treat people on the street.

And if a complaint *is* sustained against you – own it. The officers who lose the community's trust aren't the ones who make mistakes. They're the ones who won't admit them.

Know the Alternatives: Co-Responders and Diversion

Not every call needs a badge and a gun. Georgia has been building alternatives, and smart officers use them:

- **Co-responder programs** pair officers with mental-health clinicians. Georgia law (SB 403, effective July 1, 2022) requires the state's community service boards to establish them, and they now operate in agencies across the state – DeKalb County has run one since the 1990s; Brookhaven, Gainesville, Forsyth County, LaGrange, Athens-Clarke County, Savannah, Albany, and Cobb County are among the others.
- **Pre-arrest diversion** in Atlanta lets officers divert people to services instead of booking them – anchored by the Center for Diversion and Services, opened in 2025 as a 24/7 law-enforcement drop-off.
- **211 and 988** exist so that a person in crisis gets a counselor, not a confrontation. In Georgia, 988 calls are answered by the Georgia Crisis and Access Line.

Using these isn't "soft policing." It's *smart* policing – it keeps you out of no-win encounters, reduces your use-of-force exposure, and gets people help that actually works. The best officers know which tool the situation calls for.

Take Care of Yourself

This part doesn't get said enough in books like this, so let's say it plainly:

You can't serve a community well from an empty tank.

The staffing numbers tell the story – 91% of authorized strength, 70% of agencies struggling to hire. That means more overtime, more critical incidents per officer, more cumulative stress. Burnout doesn't just hurt you; it makes you worse at the job. Shorter fuse. Less patience. More force, more complaints, more injuries – the data all points the same way.

What that means in practice:

- [] **Use your department's wellness resources.** If they exist, they're not a sign of weakness – they're maintenance, like qualifying at the range.
- [] **Talk to someone who gets it.** Peer support, a counselor, a trusted partner – whoever it is, don't carry it alone.
- [] **Protect your off-switch.** Sleep, exercise, time with people who don't need anything from you. The job will take everything you give it. Decide in advance what you won't give.
- [] **Watch for the warning signs** – in yourself and your partners. Cynicism that curdles into contempt. The “us vs. them” that stops being about tactics and starts being about people. That's the moment to step back, not double down.

The officers who last – who retire healthy, with their integrity and their humanity intact – aren't the toughest ones. They're the ones who took care of themselves like it was part of the job. Because it is.

The First Five Minutes: Setting the Encounter

Most encounters are decided in the first five minutes – before any real decision gets made. Here's what the research in this book says those minutes should contain:

- [] **Introduce yourself.** Name and department. “I'm Officer , **with** .” It sounds basic. It's transformative – it turns an anonymous authority figure into a person, and it signals that you stand behind what you're about to do.

- [] **Say why you're here.** "I stopped you because your taillight is out." "We're here because we got a call about ____." People can handle bad news. What they can't handle is not knowing what's happening. Neutrality starts with explanation.
- [] **Ask, then tell.** "Can you tell me what happened?" before "Here's what's going to happen." Voice first, decision second – that's the procedural-justice sequence, and the data says it cuts complaints and force.
- [] **Narrate as you go.** "I'm going to run your license now, it'll take a few minutes." "I'm asking you to step out so we can talk safely." Narration removes the fear of the unknown, which is where most escalation lives.

Five minutes. Four habits. It's not extra work – it *is* the work.

Talking to Kids

A teenager's first police encounter shapes their view of law enforcement for life. You might be that encounter. Treat it like it matters – because it does:

- **Get on their level, literally and figuratively.** Crouching to talk to a ten-year-old isn't weakness. It's communication.
- **Explain what's happening in plain words.** Kids don't know the system. "You're not in trouble, I just need to ask you some questions" prevents panic.
- **Respect the audience.** Other kids are always watching. How you treat one teenager in front of their friends teaches twenty of them what police are.
- **Know the programs.** If your department has a Police Athletic League, mentoring, or youth outreach – and Atlanta's PAL has served ages 8-18 since 1983 – be the officer who connects kids to it, not just the one who arrests them.

The kid you treat with dignity today is the adult who trusts police tomorrow. Or doesn't. You're writing that story in real time.

Leading From the Middle: A Word for Sergeants and FTOs

Culture isn't set by the chief's memo. It's set by you – the sergeant on the shift, the field training officer in the passenger seat. Rookies don't learn policing from the academy. They learn it from watching you.

- **Narrate the why.** When you handle a call with patience and fairness, say so out loud afterward: "Here's why I did it that way." You're not just handling a call – you're training a career.
- **Correct in private, praise in public.** Pull the rookie aside when they get sharp with someone. And when they nail a hard encounter with professionalism, make sure the squad hears about it.
- **Model the complaint response.** When your officer gets complained on, your reaction teaches the whole shift. Treat it as a learning review, not a betrayal – and they'll do the same when it's their turn to lead.
- **Protect the good ones.** The officer who de-escalates, who knows the block, who the community trusts – back them. In evaluations, in assignments, in front of command. Departments promote what sergeants reward.

Culture is just what gets rewarded and what gets tolerated. You decide both, every shift.

The 30-Day Challenge

Don't try to change everything at once. Try this for thirty days and watch what happens:

- [] **Week 1:** Introduce yourself by name on every encounter. Narrate what you're doing as you do it.
- [] **Week 2:** Ask "tell me what happened" before making any decision on a call. Listen first, every time.
- [] **Week 3:** Learn five new names on your beat – not suspects, not informants. The store owner. The pastor. The kid at the rec center.
- [] **Week 4:** Find one call you would normally handle with enforcement and try the alternative – a co-responder, a diversion referral, a conversation instead of a citation. Note what happened.

Then look at your month: fewer complaints? Easier encounters? Better information from the block? The data says yes. But don't take the data's word for it. Take your own.

Why the Best Officers Are Already Doing This

Here's the closing argument, and it's simple:

Everything in this chapter – procedural justice, de-escalation, community presence, professionalism under complaint, using the right tool for the call, taking care of yourself – **is what the best officers already do**. The veterans everyone respects. The ones the community asks for by name. The ones who go home safe year after year.

This playbook doesn't ask you to be someone else. It asks you to be the officer you already are on your best day – *every day* – and it gives your department the evidence to back you when you do.

So here's the ask: **be the example**. Train the rookie the way you wish you'd been trained. When the culture pushes toward contempt, push back with professionalism. When the community extends a hand – at the NPU meeting, on the safety walk, at the cookout – take it.

The badge is a symbol of authority. But authority without trust is just force. And force, by itself, has never built anything worth keeping.

You signed up to serve. This is what serving looks like – not just enforcing the law, but *earning* the right to enforce it, one fair encounter at a time.

The community is ready to meet you halfway. This book is proof of that. Now it's your move, officer. Make it count.

CHAPTER 12: The Dialogue - Bringing Both Sides to the Table

Every real bridge in history started the same way: somebody from one side walked toward the other and said, “Let’s talk.”

Not a press conference. Not a protest. Not a tweet. A room, chairs in a circle, and people willing to hear each other. That’s what this chapter is about: how to put police officers and community members in the same room and have a conversation that actually goes somewhere.

Why Dialogue Comes Before Everything Else

Here’s a fact worth sitting with: in 2024, **74% of Americans expressed confidence in their local police** - up from 71% the year before, according to Gallup’s Center on Black Voices (report published May 2025). And **76% said they were satisfied with police-community relations** in their area. Those numbers are real, and they’re better than most headlines would have you believe.

But averages hide the people who are hurting. Among Black adults, confidence in local police was 64% - up six points from the year before, and the highest in four years of measurement. That’s progress. It’s also a gap. Sixty-four percent is not one hundred. And behind every percentage point are real people with real stories about why they don’t trust, and real officers with real stories about why they feel misunderstood.

Dialogue doesn’t start from pretending those stories don’t exist. It starts from putting them on the table.

The research backs this up. Tom Tyler’s decades of work on procedural justice - the science of why people accept authority - found that **people care more about being treated fairly than about winning or losing the particular case**. Four things make people feel an encounter was fair: **voice** (they got to tell their side), **neutrality** (the rules applied the same to everyone), **respect** (they were treated with dignity), and **trustworthiness** (they believed the authority was

genuinely trying to do right). A dialogue session is, at its core, an exercise in all four - and it's why dialogue works where lectures don't.

Who Needs to Be in the Room

The wrong room produces the wrong conversation. A room full of activists and a police public-information officer is not a dialogue - it's a press event. A room full of officers with no residents is a briefing. The magic requires both sides, and it requires the *right* people on both sides.

From the community side, invite:

- Residents who live on the block you're focused on - especially people who've had difficult encounters with police and are willing to talk about them
- **Young people, ages 14 to 24** - they are the most policed and the least heard; a dialogue without youth is a dialogue about them without them
- Clergy and faith leaders - they carry trust in many neighborhoods
- Business owners - they see the block every day
- Mothers and grandmothers - the moral center of most neighborhoods
- People who've been through the system and come out the other side

From the department side, invite:

- **Patrol officers who actually work the area** - not just command staff; residents need to talk to the officers they see on their street
- A sergeant or lieutenant from the zone or precinct
- Command staff - a deputy chief or the chief, if you can get them; their presence signals the department takes this seriously
- Officers of all ranks and backgrounds - including officers who live in or grew up in similar neighborhoods

Also invite:

- A **neutral facilitator** - not a police employee, not a community activist; someone both sides trust to run the room fairly (more on this below)
- Sometimes: a city council member, a school principal, a mental-health professional

Keep it small enough to talk and big enough to matter: **20 to 40 people** is the sweet spot for a single dialogue session. Bigger than that, and you need small-group breakouts.

Ground Rules: The Agreements Both Sides Honor

Every dialogue starts with ground rules - and the crucial part is that **both sides agree to them together**, out loud, at the start. Rules handed down by one side feel like rules. Rules agreed to by everyone feel like a covenant.

Post them on a wall where everyone can see them. Here are the ones that work:

1. **One voice at a time.** No interrupting. Everyone gets heard.
2. **Speak from your own experience.** “I” statements, not “you people” statements. “I felt afraid when...” not “You cops always...”
3. **No rank in this room.** The chief’s story doesn’t outrank the teenager’s story. Stripes stay at the door.
4. **Listen to understand, not to respond.** You’re not here to win an argument.
5. **What’s shared here stays here** - with one exception: if someone describes an ongoing crime or an imminent threat, safety comes first.
6. **It’s okay to feel uncomfortable.** Growth lives on the other side of discomfort.
7. **No phones recording without everyone’s agreement.** People won’t be honest if they think they’re being filmed for the internet.
8. **We end with commitments, not just feelings.** (More on this below.)

Read them aloud. Ask: “Can we all agree to these?” Wait for the nods. That moment - the whole room agreeing to something together - is the first small bridge.

Facilitation Basics: Storytelling Before Problem-Solving

The single biggest mistake in police-community dialogue is **jumping to solutions before sharing stories**. “How do we fix policing?” is a question for hour two. Hour one belongs to a simpler question: *“What has your experience been?”*

Here’s why: an officer who has heard a mother describe the night her son was stopped at gunpoint walking home from practice will never hear “community concerns” the same way again. A teenager who has heard an officer describe responding to a call where a fellow officer didn’t come home will never see “the police” as one faceless thing again. Stories don’t excuse anything. They *humanize* everything. And you can’t solve a problem with someone you don’t see as human.

Facilitation basics:

- **Use a neutral facilitator.** This is non-negotiable. The facilitator should not work for the police department and should not be a known activist on policing issues. Look to: local mediation centers, university conflict-resolution programs, faith-based reconciliation ministries, or trained facilitators from organizations like the National Conflict Resolution Center. Whoever it is, both the department and the community organizers must trust them.
- **Start in a circle.** Rows of chairs facing a podium say “lecture.” A circle says “we’re in this together.” It matters more than you’d think.
- **Open with storytelling, in pairs or small groups first.** It’s easier to tell a hard story to three people than to thirty. Have people pair up - one officer, one resident - and share for five minutes each: *“Tell me about a time you felt unsafe, and what you needed in that moment.”* Then come back to the big circle and invite (never require) people to share what they heard.
- **Move to the full group only when the room is warm.** You’ll feel it - the posture changes, the arms uncross, people start using each other’s names.
- **Then, and only then, ask the problem-solving question:** *“What is one thing we could do together, on this block, in the next 90 days, to make things better?”*

What the evidence says: A 2022 randomized trial published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (Weisburd and colleagues, 120 crime hot spots across three cities) found that procedural-justice policing - the voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthiness framework -

produced a **14% relative decline in crime incidents** and residents were significantly less likely to see police as harassing. A Chicago evaluation of procedural-justice training for roughly 8,500 officers (Wood and colleagues, 2020) found **10% fewer public complaints** and **6.4% less use of force**. Dialogue built on these principles isn't soft - it's one of the best-supported strategies in policing.

Formats That Work

Not every community needs the same kind of conversation. Here are formats with a track record - pick the one that fits your block:

1. Listening sessions. The department listens; the community talks. Officers are there to hear, not to defend. Best as a first step when trust is very low. End with the department summarizing what it heard - in its own words - to prove it was listening.

2. Youth-police dialogues. Structured conversations between teenagers and officers, often over multiple sessions. Research from Gloucestershire, England (Payne and colleagues, 2021) found that restorative programs built on police-young-person interaction **significantly improved procedural justice and relationships**. In Atlanta, the Police Athletic League - founded in 1983, serving more than 2,800 young people ages 8 to 18 each year - has spent four decades proving that officers and kids who know each other's names treat each other differently.

3. Ride-along swaps. Residents ride with officers; officers walk the block with residents - not on patrol, but as neighbors. Seeing the job from the passenger seat changes a resident. Seeing the block through a grandmother's eyes changes an officer. (Note: ask your precinct directly about ride-along availability - many departments run them but don't advertise the application process.)

4. Shared meals. It sounds too simple to work, and it works anyway. Officers and residents cooking and eating together - "Coffee with a Cop," barbecue in the park, Thanksgiving dinner at the precinct. Breaking bread is humanity's oldest trust ritual. Don't underestimate it.

5. Joint problem-solving on one specific issue. The most powerful format: pick *one* concrete problem - the dark corner where robberies happen, the park taken over after dark, the intersection where kids get harassed walking home - and put officers and residents on the *same team* solving it. Nothing builds trust like winning together.

6. Citizens Police Academy. Atlanta's runs Tuesday evenings, 6:00 to 9:00 PM, about nine to ten weeks, free - covering use of force, the crime lab, SWAT, 911 operations, homicide investigation, and traffic stops. It's open to metro Atlanta residents 21 and older who pass a background check (no felony convictions). Contact: Elizabeth Espy, enespy@atlantaga.gov, 404-546-2541. If your city has one, take it. If it doesn't, ask your department to start one - Atlanta's is the model.

When It Gets Heated

It will get heated. Someone will say something raw. An officer will feel attacked. A resident will cry or raise their voice. This is not failure - it's the conversation working. But the facilitator has to hold the room. Here's how:

- **Name it, don't dodge it.** "I can feel how much pain is in this room right now. Let's slow down and stay with it."
- **Return to the ground rules.** "Remember our agreement - one voice at a time. Let's hear her out."
- **Separate the person from the position.** "It sounds like what you're really saying is you want to feel safe when your son walks home. Is that right?" Getting to the need underneath the anger defuses without dismissing.
- **Give officers room to be human, too.** "Officer, it sounds like that call stayed with you. Do you want to say more about that?" Officers who are allowed to be people stop performing as uniforms.
- **Take a break before it breaks.** Five minutes, water, air. A pause is not surrender.
- **Never let one person filibuster the room.** "Thank you - I want to make sure we hear from folks who haven't spoken yet."
- **If someone is abusive or threatening, pause and speak to them privately.** Safety first, always. But distinguish between anger (welcome) and abuse (not welcome).

And tell the room at the start: *"There will be moments tonight that are uncomfortable. That's not a sign we're failing. That's a sign we're finally being honest."*

The Follow-Up: Dialogue Without Action Breeds Cynicism

Here is the most important sentence in this chapter: **a dialogue that ends with feelings and no commitments makes trust worse, not better.**

Every community has a story about the meeting where everybody talked, everybody cried, everybody hugged - and then nothing changed. That story teaches people that dialogue is theater. Don't be that meeting.

Every session must end with three things:

1. **Commitments** - specific, named, dated. Not "we'll improve communication." Instead: "Sergeant Williams will bring the zone's crime stats to next month's NPU meeting." "Ms. Johnson will organize the block's phone tree by the 15th." "Officer Davis will set up the youth basketball Saturday at the rec center - first game June 7th."
2. **A next meeting date** - before anyone leaves the room. Momentum dies in "we'll be in touch."
3. **A public record** - a one-page summary, emailed to everyone who attended and posted where the community can see it. What was said, what was promised, by whom, by when.

Then **follow up on every commitment, publicly.** At the next session, start with: "Here's what we promised last time, and here's what happened." Kept promises are the bricks of trust. Broken promises, named honestly with an explanation, are still better than silence.

Track it simply: a shared document, a group text thread, a bulletin board at the community center. The format doesn't matter. The accountability does.

Sample 2-Hour Dialogue Session Agenda

For 20-40 participants. One neutral facilitator. Chairs in a circle.

0:00-0:10 - Welcome and ground rules (10 min) Facilitator welcomes everyone, explains the purpose in one sentence: *"We're here to hear each other and leave with commitments."* Reads the ground rules aloud. Asks for agreement. Introductions: name and one word for how you're showing up tonight.

0:10-0:40 - Storytelling in pairs (30 min) Pair each officer with a resident. Prompt: *“Tell each other about a time you felt unsafe in this neighborhood, and what you needed in that moment.”* Five minutes each, then switch. Facilitator circulates, keeps time, keeps energy gentle.

0:40-1:10 - Harvesting in the big circle (30 min) Back in the circle. Facilitator invites - never requires - pairs to share what they heard *from their partner* (not their own story - this builds listening). “What did you hear that surprised you? What did you hear that stayed with you?”

1:10-1:15 - Break (5 min)

1:15-1:45 - Problem-solving together (30 min) Facilitator poses the question: *“What is one thing we could do together, on this block, in the next 90 days?”* Small groups of 5-6 (mixed) brainstorm, then each group pitches its best idea. The room picks one or two to commit to.

1:45-1:55 - Commitments (10 min) For each chosen idea: who does what, by when. Names, dates, out loud. Facilitator writes them where everyone can see.

1:55-2:00 - Closing circle (5 min) One sentence each: *“What’s one thing you’re taking with you tonight?”* Facilitator thanks everyone, confirms the next meeting date, and explains how the summary will be shared.

A Final Word on Dialogue

Dialogue is not the whole answer. Nobody ever ended a gang feud, fixed a broken policy, or brought back a life with a conversation. But every reform, every program, every partnership in this book’s earlier chapters started the same way - with people in a room, hearing each other, deciding to act together.

The table is where the bridge begins. Set it. Fill the chairs. Start talking.

And then - this is the part most people skip - **do what you said you’d do.**

What Success Looks Like

You won't always know the dialogue worked. Trust doesn't send a press release. But there are signs, and you should watch for them:

- **People use each other's names.** The shift from "the police" and "you people" to "Officer Davis" and "Ms. Johnson" is the single most reliable signal that a room has changed.
- **The second meeting is easier than the first.** Less posturing, more honesty, shorter warm-up. If meeting three feels like meeting one, something's wrong - usually a broken commitment nobody named.
- **Officers start showing up without being assigned.** When cops volunteer for the youth program or the safety walk on their own time, the relationship has moved from duty to ownership.
- **Residents start calling officers directly.** Not 911 - the cell number of the sergeant they know. That's trust with a phone number.
- **Conflict gets handled inside the relationship instead of outside it.** When something goes wrong - and something will - the question becomes "let's talk about what happened" instead of "call the news." That doesn't mean accountability disappears. It means it happens between people who know each other, which is where it works best.

None of this happens in a month. Plan on six months before you feel the shift, a year before you can point to it. The bridge is built slowly - but once it's built, it holds weight.

CHAPTER 13: Your City's Action Plan

You've read the history. You understand the trust gap. You know what works, what your rights are, and how to sit at the table. Now comes the question this whole book has been building toward:

What do I actually do on Monday morning?

This chapter is your playbook. Not theory - steps. Month by month, from showing up to building something that lasts. Whether you're a resident, a parent, a pastor, a business owner, or an officer reading this book - there's a lane here for you.

The Mindset: Work With, While Holding Accountable

Before the first step, get the posture right - because it determines everything.

You are not at war with your police department. And you are not its public-relations arm, either. You are a **partner who holds power accountable** - and those two things are not opposites. The strongest accountability comes from relationships, not from shouting across a canyon. An officer who knows your name will take your complaint more seriously than a stranger's form letter. A chief who has sat in your living room will pick up the phone when you call.

So the posture is this: **show up, build the relationship, and never stop demanding better.** Praise what's working - publicly. Challenge what's failing - publicly. Both, always. That's not contradiction. That's citizenship.

Month 1: Learn the Landscape

Don't launch anything yet. Month one is about showing up, listening, and mapping who's who.

Week 1-2: Find your existing tables.

- [] **Attend your NPU meeting.** In Atlanta, the Neighborhood Planning Unit system - 25 citizen advisory councils covering every neighborhood, A through Z - is the standing table where police commanders show up and residents speak. Find your NPU's monthly meeting and go. Sit. Listen. Introduce yourself. If you're outside Atlanta, find your equivalent: the precinct community council, the town hall, the county commission public-safety committee. Every city has a table - most people just never pull up a chair.
- [] **Attend one police-community town hall or precinct meeting.** Go with open ears and a notebook. Write down names: the zone commander, the community liaison officer, the sergeant who seems to actually care. Names are infrastructure.
- [] **Learn your department's structure.** What zone or precinct covers your block? Who commands it? Does your city have a civilian review board? (Atlanta does - the Atlanta Citizen Review Board, established 2007, independent, with subpoena power. Athens-Clarke County has a public safety oversight board, approved November 2021. Savannah added civilian participants to its use-of-force review committee in June 2025.) Know what exists before you demand what doesn't.

Week 3-4: Meet people one-on-one.

- [] **Request a meeting with your zone or precinct commander.** Fifteen minutes. Introduce yourself. Say: "I live on [block]. I want a better relationship between this neighborhood and your officers. What would help from our side?" Then listen. Commanders rarely hear that sentence. It opens doors.
- [] **Talk to five neighbors.** Not about police - about the block. What worries them? What would make them feel safer? Write it down. You're building your map of what matters.
- [] **Sign up for the Citizens Police Academy** if your department runs one. Atlanta's is free, Tuesday evenings 6:00-9:00 PM, about nine to ten weeks - use of force, crime lab, SWAT, 911, homicide, traffic stops. You'll learn how the department sees the world, and officers will learn that residents want to understand, not just criticize. Contact: Elizabeth Espy, enespy@atlantaga.gov, 404-546-2541.

End of Month 1, you should be able to answer: Who commands my zone? When does my NPU meet? What are my neighbors' top three safety concerns? What accountability channels exist in my city?

Months 2-3: Start the Conversation

Now you move from learning to convening. Small, concrete, visible.

Host a listening session.

- [] Pick a neutral, welcoming location - a church fellowship hall, a library meeting room, a community center. Not the precinct (too intimidating for some) and not a protest site (too charged).
- [] Invite 20-40 people using the room-building guidance in Chapter 12: residents, youth, patrol officers from the area, a sergeant, clergy, business owners.
- [] Hire or recruit a **neutral facilitator** - a local mediation center, a university conflict-resolution program, a trusted faith leader with no stake in policing politics.
- [] Run the 2-hour agenda from Chapter 12. End with commitments, a next date, and a public summary.
- [] **Follow up on every commitment.** This is where most efforts die. Don't let yours.

Start a block club or safety walk.

- [] A block club is the smallest unit of community power: the people on your street, organized. Monthly meetings, a phone tree, a group text. It costs nothing and changes everything - because organized blocks get attention from commanders, council members, and reporters.
- [] **Safety walks:** once a month, residents walk the block together - with an invited officer walking alongside, not leading. You see what they see. They see what you see. Dark alleys get reported. Abandoned houses get flagged. Kids see officers as neighbors. Do it consistently for six months and watch what changes.

Learn the non-police numbers and spread them.

- [] **211** - United Way's free, confidential, 24/7 line for non-emergency services: housing, food, health care, mental health, employment, childcare, transportation. When a neighbor needs services, not police - call 211.
- [] **988** - the national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call, text, or chat), launched July 16, 2022. In Georgia, 988 calls are answered by the **Georgia Crisis and Access Line** - crisis counselors, not police dispatch. For mental-health, substance-use, and suicide crises.

- [] **311 (Atlanta)** - ATL311 connects residents to the city's **Policing Alternatives & Diversion (PAD) Initiative**, which sends civilian community-response teams - not police - to people experiencing extreme poverty, substance use, or mental-health concerns. Dial 311 or 404-546-0311.
 - [] Print these three numbers on a card. Hand them out at your block club, your church, your NPU. Most people have never heard of them. That one card, in the right hands at the right moment, can keep a crisis from becoming a confrontation.
-

Months 4-6: Build Something That Lasts

Conversations are the foundation. Now build on it.

Launch a youth engagement effort.

Young people are where trust is won or lost for a generation. Pick one:

- [] **Partner with your local Police Athletic League.** Atlanta's PAL - founded in 1983 as a partnership between APD, NPUs, community investors, and businesses - serves more than 2,800 young people ages 8 to 18 every year with summer camps, athletic leagues, after-school tutoring, and mentoring (120 Anderson Ave NW, Atlanta 30314; 404-799-2341). Volunteer. Coach. Tutor. Or help start or strengthen the equivalent where you live. The evidence base for PAL-style programs is still thin - researchers are honest about that - but four decades of kids and cops knowing each other's names is its own kind of proof.
- [] **Organize recurring youth-police dialogues** using the Chapter 12 format - monthly, same kids, same officers. One session is an event. Six sessions is a relationship.
- [] **Start a "know your rights, know your resources" workshop** for teens at your library, school, or rec center - the rights material from this book's earlier chapters, taught plainly, with the 211/988/311 card in every hand.

Propose one specific reform.

Vague demands get vague responses. Pick **one concrete, winnable change** and organize around it:

- [] **Expanded co-responder coverage.** Georgia law (SB 403, effective July 1, 2022) requires the state's 22 community service boards to establish co-responder programs pairing mental-health professionals with police response. They already operate in DeKalb County, Brookhaven, Gainesville, Forsyth County, LaGrange, Athens-Clarke County, Savannah, Albany, and Cobb County (which created two teams in 2019). Does your area have one? Is it funded? Staffed around the clock? A specific ask - "fund a second co-responder team for Zone 3" - beats "do something about mental health" every time.
- [] **Stronger civilian oversight.** Does your city have a review board with real teeth - independent investigators, subpoena power, public reporting? Atlanta's board has all three and still needed a 2025 agreement just to get notified of deadly-force cases within 24 hours. Oversight is never finished; it needs constant tending.
- [] **De-escalation training.** The Louisville and Indianapolis randomized trials of PERF's ICAT program found **28% fewer use-of-force incidents** and **20% reductions in force** respectively (Engel and colleagues, 2022; reported 2026). Ask your chief: is every officer trained? Is there refresher training? (In Louisville, 40% of officers said they needed refreshers - training decays without reinforcement.)
- [] **Body-camera compliance.** Cameras only work if they're on. Atlanta's 2020 reforms tightened wearing requirements after high-profile gaps. Ask for the compliance numbers - publicly.

Bring your ask to the table you built in Month 1. The NPU, the town hall, the commander's office - you're not a stranger making demands now. You're a known partner with a specific proposal and neighbors behind you. That's how change happens.

Ongoing: Measure It, Tend It, Celebrate It

Trust isn't a project with an end date. It's a garden. Here's how to tend it:

Measure trust - simply.

You don't need a research grant. Track a few honest indicators, quarterly:

- [] **A short community survey** - five questions, same questions every time: *Do you trust the officers who patrol your block? Do you feel safer than six months ago? If you called for help,*

do you believe you'd be treated fairly? Would you recommend a young person talk to an officer they know? Run it at your block club or NPU. Watch the trend, not any single number.

- [] **Complaint-to-compliment ratio.** Ask your department for the numbers - complaints filed and commendations received, by zone, each quarter. A department serious about trust will share them. Rising compliments and falling complaints tell a story no press release can.
- [] **Meeting attendance.** Are more residents showing up to the NPU? More officers volunteering for the youth program? Participation is trust made visible.
- [] **Response and resolution.** When your block club reports the dark alley, how long until it's fixed? Track the gap between "we heard you" and "it's done." That gap is where trust lives or dies.

Hold the department accountable - through the channels that exist.

- [] **File complaints properly when they're warranted.** In Atlanta: APD's Office of Professional Standards (185 Ted Turner Dr. SW, 404-546-5945, or online at AtlantaPD.org) handles internal investigations; the **Atlanta Citizen Review Board** independently investigates 14 categories of misconduct - file within **365 days** of the incident, online, by phone, mail, email, or walk-in. Serious misconduct can also be reported to **Georgia POST** (which can suspend or revoke an officer's certification), the **GBI** (which investigates officer-involved shootings at a local agency's request), or the **DOJ Civil Rights Division** (civilrights.justice.gov).
- [] **Show up when it counts.** Budget hearings. Council votes on police funding. Chief selection processes. The people who show up write the policy.
- [] **Praise publicly, too.** When an officer does something right - de-escalates a crisis, coaches the kids' team, follows up on the alley lights - say so, loudly, where the department and the neighborhood can hear it. Accountability that only punishes teaches officers to hide. Accountability that also rewards teaches them what good looks like.

Celebrate wins - out loud.

- [] When the co-responder team launches, hold a cookout. When complaints drop for four straight quarters, say so at the NPU. When the youth dialogue group finishes its sixth session, graduate them with certificates and invite the chief.

- [] Tell the story. Local reporters are hungry for good news about police-community relations - give it to them. A neighborhood known for building bridges attracts investment, attention, and imitation.
 - [] Remember: **74% of Americans already express confidence in their local police** (Gallup, 2024 data). You're not starting from zero. You're building on something real.
-

If You're an Officer Reading This

This book wasn't written only for residents. If you wear the uniform, here's your version of the playbook:

- **Learn the names on your beat.** Not the suspects - the grandmothers, the store owners, the kids. Procedural justice research is clear: being known changes how every encounter goes.
- **Take the extra minute.** The stop that's already over, the call that's already cleared - that's where trust is built. A minute of humanity costs nothing and pays for years.
- **Show up off-duty.** The cookout, the youth game, the NPU meeting. Presence without a call for service tells a neighborhood you're a neighbor, not just a responder.
- **Welcome accountability.** The officers who thrive under scrutiny are the ones with nothing to hide. Body cameras, review boards, and community questions protect good cops - they only threaten bad habits.
- **Remember the 85,730.** That's how many officers were assaulted in 2024 (FBI) - the job is genuinely dangerous, and nobody in this book pretends otherwise. But the answer to danger was never distance. The safest officers are the ones whose neighborhoods look out for them - and neighborhoods look out for officers they trust.

You signed up to serve. This is what serving looks like up close.

The Long View: Encounter by Encounter, Year by Year

Let's be honest about timelines. Trust between police and community in America didn't break in a day, and it won't be rebuilt in a grant cycle.

It broke encounter by encounter - a stop that felt like harassment, a call that went unanswered, a shooting that went unexplained, a complaint that disappeared into a file drawer. And it gets rebuilt the same way: encounter by encounter. The officer who takes the extra minute. The resident who shows up to the meeting. The sergeant who keeps the promise. The teenager who learns an officer's name and discovers there's a person under the uniform.

The research in this book points the same direction. Procedural justice - voice, neutrality, respect, trustworthiness - isn't a program you install; it's a habit you practice, one interaction at a time. The cities that turned decrees around - Seattle's 13-year federal oversight ending in September 2025, New Orleans' decree terminating in 2025 - didn't do it with a single reform. They did it with years of sustained, grinding, unglamorous work.

So think in years, not months. The block club you start this spring might produce the neighborhood leader who transforms the precinct relationship three years from now. The teenager in your first youth dialogue might become the officer who patrols that block in ten years. You are planting trees you'll sit under later - or that someone else will.

Resources Recap: Keep This Page

Tear this out. Put it on the fridge. Share it everywhere.

- **Emergency: 911**
- **Crisis (mental health, substance use, suicide): call or text 988** - answered in Georgia by the Georgia Crisis and Access Line, 24/7
- **Non-emergency services (housing, food, health, employment): call or text 211** - free, confidential, 24/7
- **Atlanta non-police response: dial 311** - connects to the PAD Initiative's civilian community-response teams
- **File a complaint (Atlanta):** APD Office of Professional Standards - 185 Ted Turner Dr. SW, Atlanta, GA 30303; (404) 546-5945; online at AtlantaPD.org
- **Independent oversight (Atlanta):** Atlanta Citizen Review Board - file within 365 days of the incident; online, phone, mail, email, or walk-in

- **Officer certification issues:** Georgia POST - gapost.org
- **Officer-involved shootings:** Georgia Bureau of Investigation (investigates at local agency request)
- **Federal civil-rights complaints:** DOJ Civil Rights Division - civilrights.justice.gov
- **Legal help:** Georgia Justice Project - gjp.org
- **Federal community-policing resources:** U.S. DOJ Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) - community-policing guides, grants, and training materials for departments and communities
- **Learn the system:** APD Citizens Police Academy - Tuesdays 6:00-9:00 PM, free; Elizabeth Espy, enespy@atlantaga.gov, 404-546-2541
- **Youth:** Atlanta Police Athletic League - 120 Anderson Ave NW, Atlanta 30314; 404-799-2341; youth ages 8-18

The Last Word

Here's what I know.

I know there are officers who became cops because they wanted to protect people, and who go home at night carrying things they'd never tell you. I know there are mothers who pray every time their son walks out the door - not because he's doing wrong, but because the world has taught them that doing nothing wrong isn't always enough. I know both of those things are true at the same time, and I know that holding both truths is where the bridge starts.

This book gave you the history - the slave patrols and the Peel model, the Kerner Commission's warning that went unheeded, the child murders that broke a city's heart, Kathryn Johnston, Rayshard Brooks, Ahmaud Arbery. It gave you the numbers - the trust that's rising and the gaps that remain. It gave you the science - procedural justice, de-escalation that works, co-responders, restorative justice. It gave you your rights and the rooms where change happens. But none of it means anything until somebody acts.

The bridge between law enforcement and the community doesn't get built by departments or movements or books. It gets built encounter by encounter, promise by promise, by ordinary

people who decide that the gap between “us” and “them” is not a law of nature - it’s a choice. And choices can change.

It gets built from both sides. An officer who listens longer. A resident who shows up. A chief who keeps a promise. A teenager who gives a cop a chance.

And it starts with you. The person holding this book. On your block. This month.

Go build it.

- Noah

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Key Facts at a Glance

Date-labeled. See chapters for full context.

- **Procedural justice** — the research framework behind trust in policing — rests on four pillars identified by psychologist Tom Tyler: **voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthiness**.
- **Community policing** — the dominant reform philosophy since the 1990s — is built on three pillars per the DOJ COPS Office (established 1994): community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational transformation.
- **Gallup’s confidence-in-police polling** has tracked American trust in law enforcement for decades — the book’s chapters carry the latest available figures with years attached.
- **Atlanta’s Citizen Review Board** (established 2007) investigates complaints against Atlanta police officers — one of the Southeast’s longest-running civilian oversight bodies.
- **In crisis, alternatives exist:** call or text **988** for mental-health crisis, **211** for community services.

Resources

- **Emergency: 911**

- **Crisis: call or text 988** — Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 24/7
 - **Community services: call or text 211**
 - **Atlanta Citizen Review Board** — investigates complaints against APD officers
 - **Georgia Justice Project** — gjp.org — legal help for Georgians
 - **DOJ COPS Office** — cops.usdoj.gov — community policing resources
 - **To file a complaint:** APD Office of Professional Standards; your local agency's internal affairs division; the GBI for criminal misconduct
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About This Program

Building Relationships Between Law Enforcement and the Community is a program of **Noah Sanders Advocacy** — because safe neighborhoods are built on trust, and trust is built person by person, encounter by encounter.

noahsandersadvocacy.com

The bridge gets built from both sides.