A Police Department's Difficult Assignment: Atonement

In Stockton, California, city and law enforcement leaders are attempting to build trust between police and communities of color. Why is this so hard to do?

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Captain Scott Meadors (in uniform) of the Stockton Police Department oversees a trust-building workshop with community members and other police officers. Michael Friedrich/CityLab

Standing before the congregation of the Progressive Community Church of Stockton, California, Eric Jones, the city's police chief, apologized.

It was July 2016, in the furious days after the police shootings of Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, and Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Those were followed closely by the deadly ambush of police officers in Dallas, Texas, and in Baton Rouge after protests over the Sterling killing. Nationwide, police departments were assuming a protective posture as outrage roiled cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. But Jones was out in his community, talking about the role of police in everything from pre-Civil War slave-catching to Jim Crow enforcement and the carceral policies of the War on Drugs.

"This needs to be said," the white police chief told the largely African American congregation. "There was a time when police used to be dispatched to keep lynchings 'civil,' That's a fact of our history that we need to acknowledge."

In a video of his speech, Jones looks oddly marooned in his uniform on the giant church stage.

"Now, *I* didn't do that," he continued. "But the badge we

wear still does carry the burden, and we need to at least understand why those issues are deep-rooted in a lot of our communities."

The parishioners murmured in affirmation—and perhaps surprise. "My, my, my," one said.

At the time, Jones didn't know how this apology would be received. "I was nervous the first time I did it," he told me later. "I know just the way you do it is so important, and you have to be sincere."

That apology marked the beginning of an unprecedented truth-and-reconciliation process with communities of color in Stockton, a high-poverty city in California's Central Valley that for years has been struggling with a familiar American crisis. When Jones took over as chief in 2012, its annual murder rate was higher than Chicago's. That year, the city of 300,000 saw 71 homicides and an overall crime rate more than twice the national average. A municipal bankruptcy had slashed the size of the police force, and it could barely keep up with 911 calls.

After two decades of zero-tolerance policing tactics, a history of local abuse, and high-profile officer-involved shootings, there was a deep well of mistrust between police and the Stockton communities most beset by violence. A career Stockton officer, Jones had begun taking steps to

improve, training his officers on fair practices and using more focused, less invasive strategies to prevent violence. But he came to believe that they wouldn't make real headway on addressing the city's public safety issues unless he embarked on something more radical: not just apologies but atonement.

Police Chief Eric Jones arrived in Stockton in 2012, promising to repair the broken relationship between law enforcers and the community.

Michael Friedrich/CityLab

For the last two years, the Stockton Police Department has been working toward reconciliation using a trust-restoration script devised by American criminologists and international

experts in transitional justice. Along with a host of departmental reforms, police in Stockton have held a series of dialogues and workshops designed to repair their shattered relationship with the communities they serve.

Rather than broad gestures at police "accountability" that promote measures like body cameras, the city has committed to changing departmental norms wholesale. It's an uncertain, and maybe never-ending process, one that almost certainly will not conclude with a telegenic Hallmark display of forgiveness. What it might yield instead is a foundation for real trust and greater community control.

According to a new study from the Urban Institute, Stockton's reconciliation efforts are showing results. In the highest-crime, most disadvantaged areas of the city, residents' views of both police and the conditions of their neighborhoods have improved significantly since 2015. Those views turn out to be important for a whole range of reasons, but especially because they promote cooperation.

Whether this process has achieved anything approaching actual reconciliation is a different and more complicated question, one that raises all sorts of corollary questions about what the term means and to whom, and what a satisfactory objective would be in the first place. Those questions are both important—communities of color have historically been mistreated by police, and continue to be—

and somewhat moot: It appears that simply *trying* to reconcile produces promising benefits.

It's also incredibly rare. Few American public officials are willing to acknowledge their institutional role in maintaining racist hierarchies. So why are police doing it in Stockton?

Engineering trust

The reconciliation process began as part of a three-year, $5.75 million trust-building initiative of the Obama-era Department of Justice. Announced in 2015, in the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown and the eruption of unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, it aimed to "promote more equitable, just, and respectful policing practices and improve relationships and trust between law enforcement and community members."

Stockton was one of six cities—also including Birmingham, Alabama; Fort Worth, Texas; Gary, Indiana; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—that not only attempted reconciliation but also conducted trainings for police on improving procedural justice and reducing implicit bias, both concepts with decades of scholarship behind them.

Reconciliation was the most radical and least tested idea. Designed by David M. Kennedy, a criminologist at John Jay

College, the process draws from the experiences of international transitional-justice commissions like the ones in post-apartheid South Africa. The point is to address historical and recent police abuse of communities of color so they can collaborate to improve public safety.

> *"Regardless of the presidential administration now, we will continue to do this work. It's a moral imperative."*

While Kennedy was developing this idea, I worked for him as a researcher. I sat in on closed-door sessions where he synthesized advice from experts on truth-telling; I went into the field to observe the reconciliation process in practice and interview its participants. It was no secret how important it all was to him. In Kennedy's memoir, *Don't Shoot: One Man, a Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*, he explains how integral he believes racial reckoning is to stopping urban violence. No matter what you think of American policing and what its the future should be, we live with police today. It's increasingly clear they must do *something* about their racist past if they want the standing to do their job without causing further harm.

Kennedy began his career trying to engineer partnerships

between police and largely black communities to stem the devastation of the crack epidemic in the 1990s. But age-old mistrust prevented those partnerships and perpetuated the problems. "You do not see that kind of issue in places that have not been horrifically mistreated at the hands of the state and its authorities," he told me. In those neighborhoods, he believed, the fundamental legitimacy of the police was broken. Residents may have hated living amid crime and violence, but they did not trust the police to help them.

In 2003, Kennedy facilitated reconciliation meetings in a few troubled neighborhoods of High Point, North Carolina. "It was absolutely terrifying," he said. "In general, being the person who brings race to the fore and insists that people pay attention to it is a terrifying place to be." Yet he saw how powerful it could be. Police chiefs apologized for the ills of traditional drug enforcement. Black residents aired grievances and spoke with officers to unravel mutual misconceptions of one another. Slowly, they began to cooperate on solutions that closed down local drug markets.

The DOJ initiative offered a chance to test this approach on a citywide scale. In 2015, Kennedy convened police executives, community leaders, and international experts. Priscilla Hayner, a member of the United Nations standby

team of senior mediation advisors whose work on truth-seeking informed reconciliation processes in Sierra Leone and Peru, was particularly influential. “Perhaps the most important aim of any truth commission should be to prevent further violence and rights abuses in the future,” Hayner writes in *Unspeakable Truths*, her authoritative 2001 account of the subject. “[M]ost commissions recommend reforms in the military, police, judiciary, and political systems in the hope of preventing further abuses.”

With this guidance, Kennedy and his collaborators outlined the elements of a process specific to the context of American policing, one that would ask police to conduct a historical fact-finding process, acknowledge the harm their profession has done, listen to accounts of survivors, and change their official policies based on what they learn.

A difficult conversation

On a broiling evening in July, a group of three uniformed police facilitators, five Stockton police officers, and 18 residents gathered around conference tables strewn with magic markers and Super Sticky Easel Pads in a borrowed room of the Maya Angelou Southeast Library. The officers wore plainclothes, but in that uniform golf-shirt-and-chinos way that still lets you know they’re officers—and their service weapons were visible, holstered on their hips.

Scott Meadors, a captain and 28-year veteran of the Stockton Police Department, stood at the front of the room in full uniform, leading the workshop. Part training, part listening session, and part history lesson—based on "fact-finding" research that Harvard historian Elizabeth Hinton conducted in Stockton—these interactive monthly "trust-building workshops" are one form the community reconciliation process takes in Stockton today. Most of the officers were white; most of the residents were black. (The department as a whole is 57 percent white, 5 percent black, 28 percent Latino, and 8 percent Asian, a proportion somewhat askew from the city at large, where 23 percent of residents are white, 12 percent are black, 40 percent are Latino, and 21 percent are Asian, according to a 2018 equal employment report.)

"Equal application of the law," Meadors said. "When that was said, what was popping into your mind?"

Skip Roberts, a retired Stockton high school coach, stood to speak. Once, near his house in South Stockton, he told the group, a cop pointed a shotgun at him, saying he fit the description of someone officers were looking for. "It was some 22-year-old," Roberts said. "I'm in my 60s." Everyone laughed. "I'm thinking it's a profile, basically."

That's what Roberts thinks about, he said, when Meadors talks about equal application of law. "I mean, that's instilled

in me from childhood."

When Meadors asked what he meant, Roberts said that in the low-income San Francisco housing project where he grew up, the cops would "get you in the system"—meaning the criminal-justice system. When he moved to Stockton, "just about every young African American male I met had been arrested or in juvenile or something."

Stockton resident Skip Roberts (standing) addresses a group of police officers and community members at a trust-building workshop.

Michael Friedrich/CityLab

Trevor Womack, one of Jones's deputy chiefs, stood up. "I think what you just offered right there is one of the most

important things in this entire training for me," he said. "So I grew up in North Stockton. I never, ever had an experience where I was stopped by the police. No one that I knew was ever arrested. Nobody I knew was shot or killed."

That was the understanding—or lack thereof—that he took to his first assignment as a 21-year-old white cop, when he was detaining and pointing his gun at residents of Southeast Stockton, he said. "I wish I could go back to the day I started and have this kind of conversation. I would have been a whole different police officer."

Stockton has been having conversations like this since early 2017, when Jones first began holding the small, intimate listening sessions that Kennedy envisioned. Behind the badge, he felt a profound sense of obligation. "I was part of that street policing during the crack epidemic," he told me. "I felt like it was both my department's and my personal responsibility to get to the root of why that mistrust is there and do something to change it. The work we were doing really added to the racial disparities we've seen in the criminal justice system."

It would be a mistake to act as though reconciliation is wholly dependent on police—as though communities of color lack agency, and activist groups like Black Lives Matter didn't force the issue of police abuse nationally. Police, however, are the agents of the state; it's hard to

overestimate their power. None of this can happen without a willing police force, and particularly without a willing executive.

And even when you have that, it still takes some extra luck. Stockton enjoys a rare confluence of features that have helped set the table for this process. It has the enthusiastic support of Mayor Michael Tubbs, the 29-year-old city leader who has pledged to turn Stockton into a laboratory of progressive initiatives to address crime and poverty. And relations between Stockton police officials and the Stockton Police Officer's Association are uncommonly cordial—unlike in many other cities, where police officials frequently clash with the union that represents the rank-and-file. That comity has made it easier for officers to accept the process.

In 2012, a billboard promoted Stockton's embattled police department. In that year, Stockton became the largest U.S. city to file for bankruptcy, and its homicide rate was worse than Chicago's.

Ben Margot/AP

As a researcher, I observed the first three Stockton listening sessions. These weren't your usual town-hall-type gatherings, where police explain away citizen concerns. They were smaller and more vulnerable. Local organizers chose around 15 participants for each, and Jones sat in a circle with them. One of Kennedy's research assistants facilitated the conversations. At the first session, organizer and lifelong Stockton resident Tashante McCoy-Ham brought together survivors of murdered children—her own mother among them. McCoy-Ham's brother, Terri, was shot

and killed in 2012 during a personal dispute. The room vibrated with weird anticipation.

Seated in a circle with residents at the center of the big brown carpeted conference room, Jones made a version of his apology. For McCoy-Ham, this act was important. "You can only get so far without acknowledgement and accountability. Reconciliation doesn't exist without those two things," she told me. "It was awkward, but it was also powerful at the same time."

Jones spent hours hearing stories from community members whom police had traumatized. Many residents addressed deep neighborhood and family grievances, from the indignities of routine street stops to hair-raising stories of how the police had mishandled their children's homicide cases. McCoy-Ham told me she didn't have adverse experiences with police growing up, but she described their suffocating presence in her neighborhood. "They had a group of cops they called the 'jump-out boys,' because they'd literally pull up and jump out if they'd see groups of males on the corner hanging out," she said. "They were definitely profiling."

In the aftermath of her brother's murder, her view of Stockton police grew extremely dim. "They were somber. There was no conversation, no follow-up," she told me of her family's interaction with the department. McCoy-Ham

and her mother told Jones it was excruciating never to hear the official story of Terri's death from authorities, and instead to learn about it in bits and pieces from the streets.

In the weeks that followed, the department looked more deeply into her brother's case and invited her to the station to apologize and share what they knew. Through that process, she and her mother have gotten some closure. She has gone on to work with the department, holding workshops with cops on trauma and helping to provide information to survivors of recent homicide victims. "It felt really empowering to know that my voice mattered, and that it mattered in a way that was going to change the game for other families," McCoy-Ham said.

Today, the department continues to hold listening sessions and trust-building workshops with youth, LGBTQ, and other groups that have been alienated from police. The point, said Jones, is not just to make amends for the past but to build future legitimacy: "This is part of the healing process between our communities and police."

Changing the script

In August, the Urban Institute released its final evaluation of the DOJ initiative. Researchers measured residents' perceptions of police, safety and neighborhood conditions, and practices like street stops and arrests, comparing levels

from 2015 to 2017. The findings suggest a transformation.

Community surveys found that residents who held negative views of local departments ended up with views that were "markedly more positive," and perceptions of the police gained particularly among black residents. "When you aggregate across the six cities, we saw measurable, statistically significant improvement in their views of police, their degree of trust, their belief that police in general act in a procedurally just manner," said Jesse Jannetta, a senior policy fellow in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute.

Out of the six test cities, the results in Stockton were the strongest. Residents' willingness to cooperate with police on neighborhood problems increased. So did their views of safety and police legitimacy. Calls for service have increased. Violent crime has declined even as the police make fewer arrests. And officer-involved shootings dropped by 80 percent last year—a major indicator of change to activists.

Other outcomes make graphic how trust can influence neighborhood safety. The department receives more anonymous tips and solves more cases, and its homicide clearance rate jumped from 40 percent in 2017 to 66 percent in 2018. Criminologists say homicide clearance creates an important feedback loop: It demonstrates that

police are serious about protecting vulnerable communities, which goes a long way toward establishing legitimacy, in turn promoting more community cooperation on solving violent crimes. Conversely, in cities like Baltimore, where murder rates have soared in recent years, police routinely solve under 30 percent of homicides annually.

Lifelong Stockton resident Tashante McCoy-Ham has been active in advising local police on the reconciliation process. “You can only get so far without acknowledgement and accountability,” she says.

Michael Friedrich/CityLab

Of course, no reckoning would matter if police were not also changing harmful practices. In 2017, Stockton created a

community advisory board of residents like McCoy-Ham, whose feedback informs policy changes aimed at fairer, more compassionate, and less damaging policing. These include creating new de-escalation protocols, mandating mental-health training for officers, prohibiting stops based solely on the suspicion that a person is undocumented, and adding procedural justice-informed rules for conduct with the public and fellow officers.

"Stockton is the place where we saw the most across-the-board improvement," said Jannetta. While there's no way to separate the effects of reconciliation from the other interventions, he said, Stockton "certainly did the most extensive reconciliation work of any of the six sites," conducting more than 20 listening sessions by the time of the report.

But several other cities under the DOJ initiative also reported progress in their own tentative steps toward reckoning with the past.

> *"Come from behind the badge and give me an honest answer."*

In 2016, A.C. Roper, the first black police chief of Birmingham, apologized to the "foot soldiers," who marched on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement, for their

brutal mistreatment at the hands of his department. “The elder statesman of the foot soldiers said he’s been waiting all his life for that,” said Roper, whose own father was a civil rights activist in Birmingham. “Some people will say, ‘Why would you apologize for something that you didn't do?’ Well, the organization I led did it. And there's no one from the past who could come back and give a heartfelt apology.” He went on to hold listening sessions with youth of color, victims of domestic violence, and LGBTQ organizations. But in 2017, a new mayor was elected and a new chief appointed; reconciliation efforts have since stalled, according to T. Marie King, a lifelong Birmingham resident who served as community liaison for the DOJ initiative.

King thought the reconciliation work was a good opportunity to develop trust. “Regardless of how people feel about police officers, they are needed in our communities,” she said. But reconciliation can be fragile, and fleeting. “When you slow it down, people lose interest, or people feel unheard. And once that happens, then you almost have to go back to square one.”

Minneapolis saw its reconciliation efforts wind down in a similar fashion. In 2016, with the city reeling from protests over the death of Jamar Clark, a young black man killed by police officers, Police Chief Janee Harteau spoke to leaders from a range of advocacy groups about policing’s “awful

and racist" past. "I am not responsible for it," she told them. "But I can apologize for it. We know that hundreds of years of policing a racist status quo has left a legacy."

When Harteau was forced out as chief in 2018, following an officer-involved shooting, her successor, Medaria Arradondo, continued to hold listening sessions. Since the end of the DOJ initiative, however, those sessions have ceased and been replaced by other forms of community-led discussions, according to the civilian police representative who coordinated them.

Still, like Stockton, both Birmingham and Minneapolis saw improvements in community trust, and changes in official practice, during the DOJ initiative, according to the Urban Institute study. In Birmingham, residents' views on the law and willingness to work with the police improved significantly, while their perceptions of the frequency of neighborhood violence decreased. The department also made fewer arrests. In Minneapolis, residents reported significantly improved views of the law, higher perceptions of police legitimacy, and a perceived increase in neighborhood safety. The department's number of use-of-force incidents also dropped.

With the initiative concluded and little likelihood of the current federal administration underwriting further work on reconciliation, Kennedy is now seeking other cities willing to

test his model in full.

Georgia may be the first place in the country to initiate reconciliation statewide. Louis Dekmar, police chief of the city of LaGrange, made news in early 2017 when he publicly apologized to a gathering of black community members for the department's role in a lynching from 77 years prior. Recently, he recruited a group of police chiefs in Georgia—a state second only to Mississippi in its number of historical lynchings—to meet with Kennedy and outline a statewide process of acknowledgement and trust-building.

What would it take for American police and communities to really reconcile? T. Marie King put it simply: "The people who have been harmed have to feel reconciled." The international experience suggests that this process may have no clear end point. On this matter, Priscilla Hayner points to a report from the South Africa commission, which suggests that indeterminacy is an unavoidable feature. "Reconciliation is not an event," that report reads. "People cannot simply one day decide that they want to forgive and forget. Most of the victims in this community ... demand to hear the truth and to be given time to consider it. They are often not willing to forgive unless the perpetrators show remorse and some form of reparation is offered."

But what form of reparation are police prepared to offer? Can the most progressive departments harmonize their

stated intentions with their everyday use of coercive force? And is such harmony even possible for police, as representatives of the state?

In 2015, Stockton Police Chief Eric Jones (left) announced the results of training programs on implicit bias and use of force with then-California Attorney General Kamala Harris.

Damian Dovarganes/AP

Most U.S. police agencies are not exactly tripping over themselves to find out. Even under the reformist Obama-era DOJ, law enforcement has been reluctant to assume responsibility for the damage they've done. Today, President Donald Trump's DOJ has rebuked calls for police accountability and reversed oversight measures for troubled departments. The symbolic question of whether to bring

civil rights charges against the officer involved in the death of Eric Garner ended in July, when Attorney General William Barr ordered that the DOJ drop it. The Trump era has seen a return of the "law-and-order" rhetoric of past generations, calls for a revival of the "stop-and-frisk" policing tactics that were ruled unconstitutional, and an escalating role for police in everything from immigration enforcement to addressing homelessness—all measures likely to do further damage to perceptions of police among African American and Latino communities.

But in Stockton, the Urban Institute outcomes have given Jones a renewed commitment to the future of reconciliation, and to making the policy changes his community wants. "It was very encouraging," the chief said. "There cannot be a sunset on these listening sessions and other work we're doing, because we just have so far to go. But we made improvements in every single category."

He emphasized that the department has much more progress to make. "Regardless of the presidential administration now, we will continue to do this work. This is an issue that we are grappling with here in Stockton," Jones said. "It's a moral imperative."

Skeptical residents continue to show up for listening sessions, trust-building workshops, and community advisory board meetings—even though they may never see

eye-to-eye with police on certain matters. While I was in the city in July, the DOJ had just made its decision in the Garner case, and the topic was fresh on people's minds. Toward the end of the workshop I attended, Skip Roberts, the retired coach, issued a provocation about the widely viewed video of Garner's death at the hands of a New York City police officer.

"All the officers in the room," Roberts said. "Do you think that was murder that took place?"

Meadors responded quickly. "For us, we can't make a decision based off of that, because we were not in that situation. And there are all kinds of different opinions that go around. What we do know is there was an impact to Eric Garner's family, to their community, to the officers in that agency."

For a few tense minutes, it went back and forth like that: Roberts pressing Meadors on finer points like the legality of chokeholds in New York City and whether a citizen could get away with such violence; Meadors gently refusing to render a judgment while acknowledging the pain Garner's death caused. Another participant said the conversation made her feel uncomfortable, and she thought Meadors was "talking around" the issue.

As the exchange wound down, Meadors made clear that he

relishes this open dialogue. “These situations have to be talked about,” he told the room.

Later, Roberts told me that he thought this was a “political answer” from Meadors. “Come from behind the badge and give me an honest answer,” he said.

But despite those frustrations, he still found the conversation helpful. Like other local critics I spoke to—even those who believe that police are unalterably a force of oppression—Roberts ultimately valued having access to a setting in which he could challenge the police and make his voice heard. And he intended to keep doing so. “I can’t wait for the next one,” he said.