

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

# Creating a Society That Ensures Safety for All



# OVERVIEW

This is the **fourth Teaching Idea in a series** designed to help you think critically about the long and troubling history between law enforcement and Black Americans, while not stereotyping or criminalizing all police officers. The activities in this series of Teaching Ideas will help you bring a historical lens to these complex issues, engage with a range of experiences with policing, and consider ways to build a society that ensures the safety of all people.

# GET STARTED

This Teaching Idea contains the following activities:

**Activity 1:** Explore the levels of bias and potential solutions

**Activity 2:** Consider a retired police officer's statement

**Activity 3:** Final reflection

# Activity 1: Explore the Levels of Bias and Potential Solutions

Understanding the different ways in which bias appears in policing can help us find solutions and ensure that all people can feel safe in their communities. In his podcast episode [Race, Policing, and the Universal Yearning for Safety](#), journalist Ezra Klein and professor Phillip Atiba Goff discuss the “levels” of bias in policing.

In your group, read the texts explaining each “level” of bias in policing and then discuss the questions for each level. Write your ideas for solutions and share them with your class.

# Activity 1: Explore the Levels of Bias and Potential Solutions

## 1. Individual Level

Bias can appear on the individual level if a police officer treats people differently as a result of their perceived race. One example of how this could occur is if a police officer stops a Black motorist for a minor infraction, like failing to signal a turn, but does not stop a white driver in the same circumstances. Research shows that bias does occur at this level, but it is only one way in which bias can appear in policing.

### Reflect:

- How can you summarize how bias occurs at the individual level in your own words?
- What solutions could help to prevent bias from occurring at this level?

# Activity 1: Explore the Levels of Bias and Potential Solutions

## 2. Community Level

Police leaders make decisions about how many police officers to assign to different neighborhoods or whether to approve the use of certain tactics (for example, no-knock warrants) in a certain area. If these decisions are made differently for predominantly Black or minority neighborhoods than they are for predominantly white neighborhoods—which they often are—then it means that people of different racial backgrounds are policed unequally. Bias can appear at the community level even if police officers do not act in biased ways during individual encounters. Professor Phillip Atiba Goff believes this is an important level of bias to understand because “policing is fundamentally a neighborhood issue even more than it’s an encounter issue.”

### Reflect:

- How can you summarize how bias occurs at the community level in your own words?
- What solutions could help to prevent bias from occurring at this level?

# Activity 1: Explore the Levels of Bias and Potential Solutions

## 3. City Level

Bias can also appear at the level of a city, if one city is policed differently than another one. For example, imagine if every police officer in Baltimore interacted the same way with everyone and every neighborhood were policed the same way, but the police used harsher tactics in Baltimore than in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Black people make up a greater proportion of the population of Baltimore than Bridgeport, which means that there would be racial disparities in policing.

### Reflect:

- How can you summarize how bias occurs at the city level in your own words?
- What solutions could help to prevent bias from occurring at this level?

# Activity 1: Explore the levels of bias and potential solutions

## 4. Societal Level

Finally, it is also important to understand and address the factors that cause crime. Researchers know that people are less likely to commit crimes when they have access to services such as quality education, employment opportunities, health care, and safe public spaces. Predominantly Black communities and other historically marginalized communities are less likely to have access to these services as a result of racist policies in the United States, such as redlining. The impact of racist policies can partially explain why a greater number of crimes are reported in poor communities and communities of color. (Crime is also over-reported in many predominantly Black communities compared to predominantly white communities, since there is often a greater police presence in these communities.)

### Reflect:

- How can you summarize how bias occurs at the societal level in your own words?
- What solutions could help to prevent bias from occurring at this level?

## Activity 2: Consider a retired police officer's statement

On this slide and the following two slides, read the excerpt from the New York Bar Association article [40-Year Law Enforcement Vet Explains What Good Policing Should Look Like](#), written by retired police officer Cedric Alexander:

What does good policing look like—literally, *look* like? Anything but an invasion.

*The police are the public and the public are the police.* This is a social equation, and like any other equation, it must balance. America's current crisis, therefore, cannot be understood as a crisis of policing. It is a crisis of the American people, which, naturally, includes the police.

Good policing tactics, strategies, and policies are necessary to good policing. But they are not sufficient.

## Activity 2: Consider a Retired Police Officer's Statement

First, we must look beyond these necessities. The visible and vocal manifestations of the widespread public denial of police legitimacy were triggered by the actions of a few officers, by which I emphatically do *not* mean a few “bad apples.” What we need to understand is that the acts of any individual officer come not alone from his or her head, heart, or instinct. Each act is also the sum of that officer’s training and the informed embrace of values received through the culture of the agency in which that officer serves.

We must, then, look beyond tactics, strategies, and policies to departmental values and culture. But precisely because the police are the public and the public are the police, we must also look to the context in which each law enforcement agency develops its values and culture. They are products of wider American society, laws, and history.

## Activity 2: Consider a Retired Police Officer's Statement

Good policing looks like the acts of each police officer. Each act is, in some essential way, the result of our society, laws, and history. Many politicians vehemently object to the notion of “systemic racism” in policing or American society.

Well, objection overruled. Racism is *manifestly* endemic in the American system.

But systemic as well is our intense and enduring American aspiration toward what a slaveholding Thomas Jefferson described in the Declaration of Independence: a society in which all people are regarded as they were created – equal – all possessing the same unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The more that American policing succeeds in closing the gap between aspiration toward and realization of *these* systemic constituents of America, the more the nation's policing will look like good policing.<sup>1</sup>

1. Cedric Alexander, “[40-Year Law Enforcement Vet Explains What Good Policing Should Look Like](#),” NYSBA, July 14, 2020.

# Activity 2: Consider a Retired Police Officer's Statement

## Reflect:

- What levels of bias does Cedric Alexander discuss in this passage?
- Cedric Alexander uses the phrase “a few ‘bad apples’” in this passage. What do you think he means by this phrase? Why does he disagree that problems in policing can be explained by “a few ‘bad apples?’”
- What do you think Cedric Alexander means when he says, “Good policing looks like the acts of each police officer. Each act is, in some essential way, the result of our society, laws, and history.”? How can individual actions be the result of “our society, laws, and history”?
- What solutions does Cedric Alexander suggest could help improve policing in the United States?

## Activity 3: Final Reflection



Reflect on what you have learned throughout this series of Teaching Ideas. Then, respond to the following prompts in your journal:

- If my community takes issues related to policing and racial injustice seriously, what are the implications for our collective action and behavior? What new actions would we take on? What current actions or behaviors might we need to change?
- If we don't do anything to change policing, what could happen?