

# Are there segments of the community that have historically been ignored or excluded?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 5 OF 14**



## Residents Examine Race and Public Safety

Hopkinsville, Kentucky (pop. 32,000)  
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Starting in 2007, the Hopkinsville Human Relations Commission launched “Hoptown – Our Town,” a large-scale community dialogue, to bring people together to address racial tensions between townspeople and public safety officials. Because nearly half of the prison inmates in the region are people of color, community leaders realized they needed to look for solutions. More than 100 Hopkinsville residents took part in the dialogues, taking a hard look at the root causes of racial inequities in the criminal justice system. With support from the Human Relations Commission, Hoptown – Our Town has paved the way for change. In late 2009, participants came up with a number of plans through an action forum. By early 2010, the following steps had been taken:

- The chief of police and sheriff signed a joint proclamation supporting the Hoptown – Our Town recommendations.
- The Hopkinsville Police Department scheduled its first diversity training.
- Seven small grants were awarded to local organizations, with the aim of improving community-police relations.
- Hopkinsville’s leaders, including the police chief, sheriff and county attorney, agreed to support recommendations for building better relations between residents and public safety officials.

Hoptown – Our Town has plans to broaden participation in the dialogues, conduct community surveys to find out how people feel about the criminal justice system, and develop recommendations that might help local agencies reduce the number of people of color in the penal system.

Local officials sometimes come into office hoping – or even assuming – that they have a “blank slate” to work from in their efforts to engage different segments of the community. But history matters, and in most cities, the history of the relationship between City Hall and citizens includes a great deal of inequality and mistrust. Race is the most common and probably the most significant dividing line in local politics, but other kinds of differences (ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, age group, legal citizenship status, newcomers vs. old-timers) can also be critical. What happened in the past, and how people feel they have been treated in the past, will affect how they interact with local officials in the present.

Furthermore, biases and patterns of discrimination may be just as strong today as they were in the past. Local officials are faced with three facets of racism, religious bigotry and other ‘isms’: the historical damage they have done, the current damage they may be causing, and people’s perceptions about being ignored or excluded. All three can have a major impact on the relationship between government and citizens, and all three must be considered in any conversation about public engagement. Communities need to deal with the painful aspects of their history, they need to address current inequalities and they need to be able to communicate across their differences.

## MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS:

- Are there groups of people in your city who feel that they have been excluded or ignored?
- Are there particular events or developments in the history of your city that have had a major impact on how different groups of people get along, feel represented or work together?
- Have surveys or polls been conducted recently on residents' feelings about race, religion or other kinds of cultural differences? If so, what were the results?
- Have issues of difference been particularly 'hot' in your city recently? Has there been a recent high-profile incident that has raised concerns and tensions?
- Is there an 'achievement gap' between students of color and white students in the school system? If so, how is the community addressing it?
- How have issues of race and difference affected police-community relations?
- What kinds of public engagement efforts have been organized around issues of race, religion, or other kinds of difference? How successful were they? How are they perceived by various sectors of the community?

## POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Gather data on how race, religion, and other demographic differences are evident in voter turnout, participation in public meetings, and other aspects of public life.
- Reach out to leaders in the faith community to get their perspectives on how issues of difference are playing out in the city.
- Convene a small, diverse set of local leaders for a frank conversation on how they think issues of difference are affecting the community.

