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Do you trust the police? Do you think the police trust you? The public's relations with Europe's boys and girls in blue can be rocky, particularly for members of minorities. EU-funded research has looked into the power of restorative justice to foster constructive attitudes and defuse conflicts.



[1]

Restorative justice can help to dismantle barriers between minorities and the police, but the idea still has to make its way in many European countries. The [Corepol](#) [2] project, which explored this approach to conflict management in Austria, Germany and Hungary, identified a number of successful approaches.

However, few formal mechanisms are actually in place, says project coordinator Joachim Kersten of the German Police University. The Corepol partners hope to bring about change.

First and foremost, says Kersten, every country needs structures specifically designed to receive and investigate accusations of police misconduct — and these complaints commissions have to be independent.

“When people feel that they can complain about ordinary conflicts, then these conflicts do not escalate into general prejudice or stereotypes that kill trust in the police — and the police organisations can use this feedback to improve its performance,” Kersten notes.

Beyond prejudice

In theory, everyone should be equal before the enforcers of the law. In practice, that's not everyone's experience of interacting with the police. It's hard to feel equal, for example, if you're stopped and searched twice on your way to the supermarket because you look different.

Sometimes, the problems lie not in over-policing, but in the withdrawal of the long arm of the law. Examples include those cases where residents of minority neighbourhoods complain that police are slow to respond to their calls.

Police, in turn, may feel that some groups refuse to cooperate with them on principle, responding with hostility to their presence. We expect our law enforcers to keep a cool head under pressure, but it is obvious that tense situations are not conducive to constructive dialogue.

Such instances of antagonism and discrimination, however deplorable, should not distract from the fact that many people on either side are deeply committed to mutual acceptance and respect. Sometimes, they are simply outnumbered. And in a situation shaped by preconceived ideas, a clumsy gesture or remark can trigger a crisis that a mere apology might have prevented.

Mutual respect

Restorative justice is a practice where the parties involved in a conflict try to solve the issue by communicating with each other and trying to find a solution that works for both sides, Kersten explains. It is a good way to address minor incidents, ensure that they don't escalate, and create an atmosphere of trust, he notes. The project did not, however, study it as a way to deal with punishable offenses or misconduct.

Corepol focused on police interaction with sub-Saharan Africans in Austria, citizens of Turkish descent in Germany, and Hungary's Roma. It has produced an overview of restorative justice practices in all three countries, which include approaches as varied as structured dialogue, de-escalation training and intercultural competence workshops.

Embracing the force

Moving beyond prejudice, profiling and distrust is no simple task, but Corepol's case studies show that it can be done.

Dialogue is the key, says Kersten. "It's people that get things going; it's individuals with their commitment, drive and patience. You find them in the police and you find them in the communities and you find them in the NGOs and so on. Without those persons, nothing moves."

Kersten notes that he found the same dedication in the project officers supporting Corepol on behalf of the European Commission, who thus added to the momentum.

Corepol ended in December 2014, having produced a body of knowledge that is now feeding into the training of high-level police officers and into a new EU-funded project dedicated to community policing.

The project's insights are also disseminated at conferences and events. Restorative justice, says Kersten, can make good police even better — a prospect that the bobbies by our side are surely keen to explore.

See also:

[CORDIS](#) ^[3]

Project:

Conflict Resolution, Mediation and Restorative Justice and the Policing of Ethnic Minorities in Germany, Austria, and Hungary

Project Acronym:

COREPOL

Project website:

<http://www.corepol.eu> [2]

Source URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/news/restorative-justice-and-long-arm-law>

Links

- [1] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/system/files/newsroom/fotolia_75638936_subscription_s_10684.jpg
- [2] <http://www.corepol.eu>
- [3] http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/102071_en.html