Fighting For A Future: Millennials Tackle Criminal Justice Reform In Columbia, SC

By Sheila E. Isong and Nicholas Kitchel May 2016

In late 2015, Generation Progress convened Millennial Criminal Justice Roundtables in four American cities: Columbia, SC; Baltimore, MD; Phoenix, AZ; and Dallas, TX. This is one of four columns Generation Progress will issue on the Millennial Criminal Justice Roundtable series. These columns will culminate with the release of a full-length report that discusses the common themes that emerged from these roundtable conversations, and the solutions that Millennials are calling for to address our broken criminal justice system.

Millennials are coming of age in a time of great uncertainty. Widespread attention regarding cases of police brutality, including the murders of Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd, Freddie Gray, and more, have thrust criminal justice reform to the forefront of national consciousness. Young people face significant challenges and grapple with issues such as: mass incarceration, sentencing reform, recidivism and re-entry, police brutality, and community policing. It is clear that young people are fighting for a future where the criminal justice system works equitably for people from all walks of life. For these reasons, Generation Progress embarked on a Millennial Criminal Justice Roundtable tour of four American cities, with a goal of identifying a Millennial agenda for criminal justice reform.

Between September and December of 2015, Generation Progress traveled to Columbia, SC; Baltimore, MD; Phoenix, AZ; and Dallas, TX. Each city was selected based on its unique demographics and diversity of perspective on criminal justice issues. An organizing committee of local leaders within the criminal justice reform movement compiled the invitation list for each roundtable. Attendees included local, state, and national activists, organizers, policy experts, law enforcement agents, elected officials, academics, entrepreneurs, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

On September 24, 2015, Generation Progress hosted its first Millennial criminal justice roundtable in Columbia, SC.
The six-member organizing committee included representatives from Sowing Seeds into the Midlands, the Columbia Talented 10th, Richland County Public Defender’s Office, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., and students from two educational institutions. In total, the roundtable attracted over 50 participants, the vast majority of whom were black.

Columbia was a fitting choice for the first stop on the roundtable tour considering the incidents that catapulted South Carolina to the forefront of the national conversation around criminal justice reform. First, there was the video-taped killing of an unarmed black man, Walter Scott, in nearby Charleston, SC by a white police officer. Second, there was the church shooting of nine unarmed black people by white supremacist and neo-Nazi Dylann Roof. Third, there was the highly politicized process of removing the confederate flag from the SC statehouse led by black activist Bree Newsome.

This roundtable was unique in that Generation Progress was invited by the Columbia Police Department (CPD) to host the roundtable in Columbia. In fact, 12 of the 55 participants were members of the CPD and Richland County Sheriff’s Department, and the Police Chief and Deputy Police Chief even made appearances at the event. To kick off the conversation, the event featured a keynote from Columbia’s Mayor, Steve Benjamin, giving participants an opportunity to engage with their elected and non-elected leaders, and directly hold them accountable.

Ultimately, the event was successful because of the unique opportunity participants had to sit across the table from police officers and share their stories, lived experiences, and perceptions in a safe environment. Young people were able to have an outlet for their frustrations, while also having a forum to develop solutions to criminal justice issues.

Although attendees discussed a wide range of topics, two policy recommendations were particularly striking.

**Police departments should provide residents with transparent processes for reporting and challenging police misconduct.**

If participants in the Columbia roundtable wanted to find out what the Columbia Police Department had been up to prior to the event, all they had to do was attend the Public Command Staff Meeting (PCSM) on September 23, 2015. Every other week the CPD hosts this meeting as an open forum for community members to hear directly from officers and department leadership. The meeting featured approximately 20 attendees and reviewed the recent crime numbers for each district within the city.
In addition to this standing meeting, the CPD recently released an Internal Affairs report (2014), which highlighted their process when investigating complaints of officer misconduct, use of force incidents, and vehicle pursuits. \(^{11}\) According to the CPD, the report “gives a complete overview of [their] internal affairs activities along with supporting data and information” in efforts to “demonstrate transparency, improve performance, and increase accountability.” \(^{12}\)

Participants in Columbia were interested to hear more about the standing meeting and the internal affairs report. Many of them were unfamiliar, so it was a great opportunity for them to hear about all the proactive work in which the CPD has invested. Some Millennials suggested that the daytime PCSM be moved to after school/work hours, enabling more people to attend. They were grateful to hear about the internal affairs report and especially interested in Columbia’s low police misconduct cases. Many of them didn’t think the report was reflective of their everyday lives and day-to-day encounters with the police.

Young people told personal stories where they or close family/friends had been mistreated by CPD police officers. They made it clear that some of CPD’s mechanisms were progressive but didn’t do enough to discourage and/or punish officer misconduct. They wanted the 12 police officers present to know that they had been mistreated by the police and their experiences were not reflected in the internal affairs report.

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**Police departments should implement community policing initiatives that encourage police officers to build relationships with community members and residents.**

Community policing initiatives were a big part of the discussion in Columbia, SC. With the city’s police chief and deputy police chief in attendance, the conversation was honest, robust, and relevant. To promote community policing initiatives that emphasize communication and transparency between the police and the community, the CPD has implemented rigorous and consistent tactics. They require “new recruits to spend a week volunteering, often working at homeless shelters, children’s hospitals, or soup kitchens. The goal is to convey the importance of service to the community at the beginning of their training, their most impressionable time.” \(^{13}\)

Deputy Police Chief Melron Kelly stated, “We want our police officers to understand that they are public servants who serve as guardians rather than warriors.” \(^{14}\) His department actively engages the community by hosting open forums every other week. At these gatherings, community members have an
opportunity to hear the CPD’s reports and ask them questions directly. They serve as an opportunity for the department and the community to have open and honest conversations. Millennials noted the inconvenient time (in the middle of the day) of these meetings, and suggested the CPD hold them after school and work hours.

In addition to their training and open forums, the CPD provides low-cost loans to officers who wish to live in Columbia in an effort to immerse their officers in the communities they patrol. “The residential officer program is designed to allow officers to become members of the communities they serve.” When you live next to Columbia citizens, go to the grocery stores with them, you get to know them—if you encounter a combative situation with a city resident you can then address it with a level of compassion for your fellow city resident,” stated Deputy Police Chief Kelly.

It is clear that Columbia, SC is doing a lot in terms of progressive police reform and building relationships between the community and law enforcement. As stated by the roundtable attendees, there is always room for improvement and law enforcement officials should heed their voices and continue to make constructive reforms. Nonetheless, the CPD has a number of model policies from which other police departments across the country could learn a great deal.

End Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Author’s calculations are based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates; “S0101. Age and Sex,” available at http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR_S0101&prodType=table (last accessed January 2016).
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.