



OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS

FROM THE REPORT "COMMUNITY ADVISORY
BOARDS: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T"

What are Community Advisory Boards?

Community advisory boards are groups of community representatives who meet with a policing agency to discuss public safety in a jurisdiction. Sometimes called "police-community advisory boards," "citizen advisory commissions," or "civilian advisory groups," these boards can be found across the country—from small townships to major metropolitan areas. CABs are one of the most common ways U.S. policing agencies engage the public.

What is the purpose of a Community Advisory Board?

Typically, CABs are purely advisory. They provide advice and recommendations to police leadership or other officials, but the suggestions are non-binding. Community members on these boards usually work on a voluntary basis and are not compensated for their time.

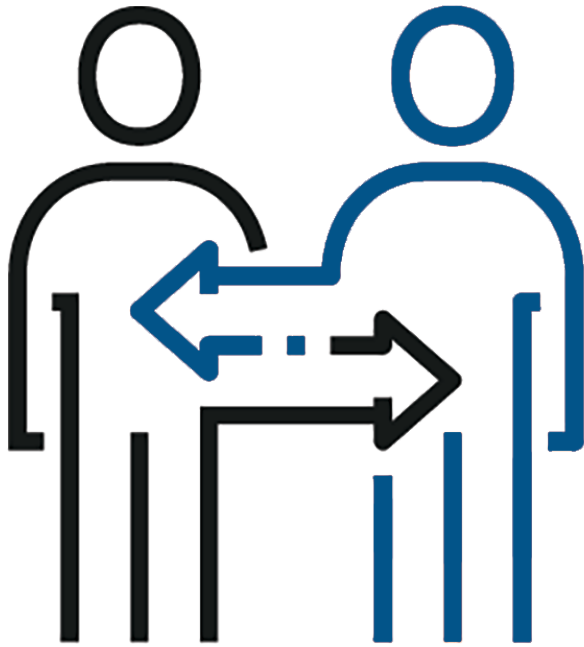
CABs are distinct from *citizen review boards*, which review complaints of misconduct, conduct investigations, or review the work of internal police disciplinary processes on the "back end," meaning after something has gone wrong. By contrast, CABs works on the "front end" to review policies and practices before police act.

Why are Community Advisory Boards created?

CABs often are established in the aftermath of a controversial incident of alleged police misconduct, such as a police shooting of an unarmed individual. These incidents can deepen the longstanding divide between the police and community members, particularly in low-income communities of color. Following such an incident, a policing agency may propose the formation of a CAB to send a message about accountability, identify and remedy the issues underlying the incident, and strengthen relationships with estranged communities. Even when not related directly to a specific event, CABs almost always are formed to address strained relationships between policing agencies and the communities they serve.

How are Community Advisory Boards structured?

CAB structures vary widely. Usually, the chief executive of a policing agency convenes and communicates directly with community members. But sometimes, a city ordinance or community initiative establishes a CAB.



How are Community Advisory Board members selected?

CAB members are appointed in a number of ways, and what process is utilized will likely affect how the CAB's performance is perceived. Most often, a chief or other executive will recruit and select members from various groups of stakeholders (e.g. neighborhood councils, affinity groups, etc.), though occasionally, city officials or affinity groups select CAB members. From the community's perspective, CAB members appointed by a policing agency may be seen as partisan and only serving the interests of the agency, whereas CAB members who are externally appointed are sometimes seen as more independent.

On the other hand, from the police perspective, CAB member appointments by city officials may be seen as politicized, and the police may feel CAB members are under the control of politicians.

Either option will affect the way the CAB is perceived, but acknowledging this beforehand can help to mitigate negative public perceptions of bias, political favor, partisanship, or nepotism in CAB appointments.

What do Community Advisory Boards do?

CABs typically perform three functions:

1. Bridge the Gap Between Police and Communities:

CABs provide a somewhat formal structure for community members to share their views and concerns. When police departments are not able to obtain the views of the community in one-on-one interactions, CABs can fill the gap. CABs are also a means for policing agencies to disseminate accurate information in crisis situations, either during an incident or during the subsequent investigation. CABs can be a legitimizing presence during the police department's crisis response, helping to promote trust and community buy-in.

2. Serve as a Sounding Board for Policing Agencies:

CABs frequently serve as a sounding board for a policing agency's leadership, and they occasionally weigh in on various policies and practices that an agency is considering. Whether an agency is responding to a controversial incident, or is contemplating a change in policy, a CAB can be a trusted body for honest advice on what to do and how best to do it. Many agencies work with their CABs to gauge public sentiment following critical incidents and help shape a more thoughtful response.

3. Facilitate Outreach for Community Events:

CABs also help police communicate with the public about upcoming events. Non-enforcement community engagement activities can contribute to building and maintaining relationships and community trust substantially. But to accomplish this type of engagement, the public must be made aware of opportunities to engage and be encouraged to attend. When CAB members with strong ties to their communities publicize and promote police-community engagement, events gain credibility and attendance improves.

[Read the full report at PolicingProject.org/CAB](https://PolicingProject.org/CAB)



HOW TO CREATE AND OPERATE

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS



FROM THE REPORT "COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T"

Community Advisory Boards ("CABs") are groups of community volunteers who meet with police to discuss public safety in a jurisdiction. CABs are one of the most common ways policing agencies in the United States engage the public. Yet, there has been insufficient study of whether CABs actually serve any meaningful oversight or community-engagement role. To assess the strengths, challenges, and overall utility of CABs, the Policing Project carried out an in-depth, national study. After conducting site visits and interviews with CABs across the country, we found that in practice, many suffer from various deficiencies—some quite serious—that often inhibit their ability to achieve their goals.

However, CABs can be effective. When they are working well, CABs are an integral part of a broader police-community engagement strategy and have the capability to amplify the influence of community voice in policing. But this will not happen unless the CAB is created in a thoughtful way, and attention continually is given to assuring its success.

Here we offer **seven key findings** from our study to guide policing agencies, community members, and advocates who seek to create or improve a CAB.

1. Decide if Forming a CAB Actually is the Best Engagement Strategy for Your Jurisdiction

Due to the long-term, sustained effort required to maintain high-functioning CABs, some other form of engagement may be more appropriate for certain jurisdictions looking to improve police-community relations. There are many forms of community engagement available to communities and policing agencies, many of which can be very effective either in lieu of or alongside a CAB. These include: social media, community forums or listening sessions, task forces, regularly scheduled community meetings, surveys, citizen review boards, and commissions.

2. Ensure the CAB is Well-Resourced

If a municipal government or policing agency truly is committed to a "front-end" formal advisory model, the proper resources must be appropriated for administrative staff, an operating budget, etc. CABs cannot operate effectively on the labor of volunteers alone.

To work effectively, CABs require concerted support. Even with a small amount of funding and resources dedicated to their operation, CABs are much more likely to achieve their potential. Having dedicated personnel available to publicize the upcoming meetings, set meeting agendas, take notes, and help facilitate conversations can make a world of difference.

3. Create a Clearly Defined Charter that Establishes Realistic Expectations

CABs should have a charter that clearly outlines the board's authority, mission, goals, and procedures. A charter can help a board by:

- Enumerating what it is empowered to do;
- Ensuring that its members—both police and members of the public—know what they are signing up for;
- Defining how the policing agency is to respond to suggestions from the CAB;
- Providing membership qualifications, number of members, and appointment procedures;
- Outlining rules of and criteria for participation;
- Detailing basic operating procedures and protocols to be followed; and
- Establishing a point of reference during times of institutional change and leadership transitions.

4. Provide Members with Technical Knowledge Necessary to Weigh In on Policy Matters

CAB members frequently do not have a sufficient technical understanding of policing issues, which can hinder their ability to participate in policy deliberations. Agencies can and should provide CAB members with a baseline understanding on a core set of topics, such as an agency's policies, best practices, use of emerging technologies and current challenges. External advocates—including civil liberties groups and academics from local universities—can be consulted or invited to present during meetings to provide a healthy balance of perspective on issues.

5. Ensure Membership Diversity Along Several Dimensions

It is essential that CAB membership be diverse across a range of dimensions—not only in terms of demographic makeup, but also by professional background, experience, skills, and perspectives on policing. One of the common purposes of a CAB is to improve the relationship between a policing agency and the communities it serves. For this reason, it is critical to have CAB members from marginalized and over-policed communities, who are willing to voice the perhaps difficult-to-hear but honest feedback about how the police, and the actions they take, impact those communities.

6. Ensure Members Do Not Suffer from Participation Fatigue and Burnout

Even with a clearly understood mandate and committed CAB members, there can be an issue of participation fatigue. To mitigate member burnout and absenteeism, members should serve set terms. Some CABs also use term limits to ensure that new members and perspectives continually are cycled onto the board. There should be agreed-upon rules regarding member absences or lack of participation, so that inactive members can be replaced.

7. Establish Operating Procedures and Meeting Protocols

For a CAB to be successful, it is necessary to develop and utilize operating procedures and meeting protocols that address some basic issues, such as:

- Whether the CAB will receive funding
- Whether there will be officers
- How often the board will meet
- Meeting structure and guidelines
- How decisions and recommendations are made *and* received.

Operating procedures also provide logistical guidance for how a CAB should work together to complete tasks, including setting agendas and documenting minutes. □



Read the full report at PolicingProject.org/CAB