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Knowledge and Innovation Site Profile

Response to Mass Demonstrations at the Columbus (OH) Division of Police



KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION SITE PROFILES

This is one in a series of profiles being published as part of the Knowledge and Innovation (KI) Site Network. The agencies highlighted in these profiles are part of the KI Site Network and have demonstrated exemplary practice in a core area of policing. The KI Site Network provides resources and peer engagement opportunities at no cost to law enforcement agencies. Visit www.leknowledge.org to learn more.



THE APPROACH

The Columbus Division of Police's approach to mass demonstrations emphasizes planning, dialogue, and graduated response, focusing on protecting constitutional rights while maintaining public safety. The approach, grounded in research, is based on the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM), a theory of crowd psychology developed by social psychologist Clifford Stott.

The Division's Dialogue Team includes designated personnel responsible for proactive communication and ongoing dialogue with internal stakeholders and external demonstration leaders before, during, and after events. The Dialogue Team duties are separate from enforcement functions.

Early engagement and consistent internal and external communication help reduce tension and prevent escalation during dynamic events. The approach builds on lessons from prior demonstrations and is continuously refined through policy updates, training, and operational coordination, reflecting both evidence-based practices and practical experience.

Knowledge Lab Core Practice Areas

- Community Trust & Partnerships
- Crime Investigations
- Crime and Violence Response
- Crime Victim Support
- Mass Critical Incident Response
- Mass Demonstration Response
- Mental Health & Crisis Response
- Office Safety & Wellness
- Public Transparency
- Recruitment and Retention
- Stops, Searches & Arrests
- Technology Implementation
- Training & Education
- Use of Force

KEY ELEMENTS

Dialogue and Engagement

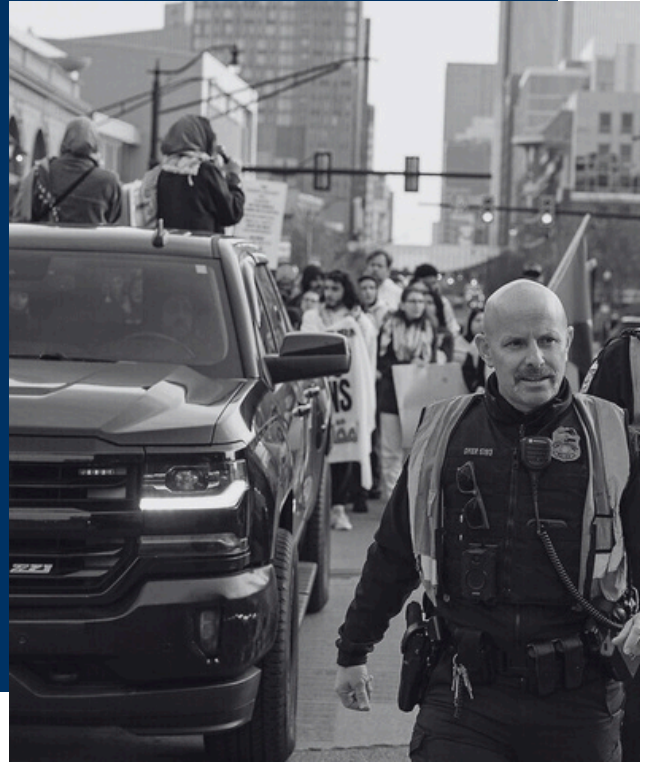
- Designated personnel responsible for communication with demonstrators
- Separation between dialogue and enforcement roles

Pre-Event Planning

- Contextual assessment using open-source and event information
- Scalable deployment strategies allow staffing and resources to expand or contract based on demonstration size and risk in real time
- Phased approach, proportionate responses as conditions evolve
- Early engagement with external stakeholders and demonstration leaders can change the trajectory of an event
- Clear role definition among the various Columbus Division of Police teams and other law enforcement agencies deployed for mass demonstrations reduces confusion during rapidly evolving situations

Crowd Management Practices

- Emphasis on officer posture, timing, and communication
- Policies guiding crowd-control tactics emphasize proportionality, de-escalation, and clear authorization to support lawful assembly and public safety



“When communication is established early, it can prevent situations from escalating later.”

-Command-Level Officer, Columbus Division of Police

THE BENEFITS

A well-developed mass demonstration response framework safeguards First Amendment rights, reduces the likelihood of escalation or use of force, and strengthens public confidence during high-visibility events. Proactive engagement and clear role assignments help manage dynamic situations effectively, while transparent communication ensures stakeholders understand decision-making and outcomes. The framework's structured approach also supports continuous improvement through lessons learned, policy updates, and training refinements.

AGENCY AT A GLANCE

The Columbus Division of Police has over 1,800 officers and 300 civilian employees. Serving over 900,000 residents in one of the largest cities in the Midwest, the Division covers 20 precincts across the greater Columbus metropolitan area. The Division routinely manages large-scale public demonstrations and has developed structured approaches to crowd management and First Amendment assemblies.

“When events end safely and constitutionally, with minimal enforcement, that’s a success for us.”
- Command-Level Officer, Columbus Division of Police

PHOTO CREDITS

Photos provided by the Columbus Division of Police, 10TV, The Christian Science Monitor, and Getty Images

