

The Role of Police in a Democracy

One major concern of citizens is the role that police play in their everyday lives. The common usage of cell phones with video capability has enabled citizens to record numerous incidents between police and persons being stopped and interrogated. Tragically, a number of these have resulted in the deaths of such persons. Subsequent posting of these videos on social media has created an environment where the public has become judge and jury. Over the last five years public opinion has reached a crescendo of pro-and anti-police sentiments. Because we are in this situation today, this seems like the appropriate time to take a step back and to look more carefully and objectively at the many issues facing policemen and the numerous accusations of misconduct. Hopefully this conversation will enable us to become better informed and to more carefully and thoughtfully address what we want from the police in our society.

As part of this effort, it is important to look back at the history of policing in the United States, the present status of police forces, the roles and functions that we expect of police officers, the statistics of police practices as they relate to social justice, the sources of information used by the public to determine the appropriateness of police behavior, the relationship between police practice and general political ideologies, and the emotional responses to police behaviors in carrying out their responsibilities. We will also want to examine what we believe to be the role of police departments, the basic requirements for becoming a police professional, and how they can best gain the support of the communities that they serve.

Dr. Harry Potter of Eastern Kentucky University¹ does a good job of exploring the history of policing in the country. Until the 1830s there were a number of informal modalities for performing the functions of police work. Starting with Boston in 1830 a system of municipal police forces developed in the north. By 1880 all major cities in the country had police forces.

“These ‘modern police’ organizations shared similar characteristics: (1) they were publicly supported and bureaucratic in form; (2) police officers were full-time employees, not community volunteers or case-by-case fee retainers; (3) departments had permanent and fixed rules and procedures, and employment as a police officer was continuous; (4) police departments were accountable to a central governmental authority (Lundman 1980).” In the south the development of police forces have a different history and are related to the development of slave patrols. After emancipation, ...these vigilante-style organizations evolved in modern Southern police departments primarily as a means of controlling freed slaves who were now laborers working in an agricultural caste system, and enforcing ‘Jim Crow’ segregation laws, designed to deny freed slaves equal rights and access to the political system.”

The police forces main response was the control of disorder as defined by the mercantile class. “The emerging commercial elites needed a mechanism to insure a stable and orderly work force, a stable and orderly environment for the conduct of business, and the maintenance of what they

¹ <https://plsonline.eku.edu/insideloook/history-policing-united-states-part-1>

referred to as the ‘collective good’ (Spitzer and Scull 1977).” While these police forces were ostensibly guided by the rule of law, in reality they became tools of the power structure to assure the maintenance of the existing political systems in the power relationships within the systems. In the late 1800s and into the 1920s a lot of their work was involved with anti-labor enforcement. Starting in the 1920s and the onset of prohibition police forces became more and more under the control of political machines in the cities. Prohibition greatly expanded political corruption in many police forces became instruments of organized crime. “On a national basis, President Hoover appointed the Wickersham Commission in 1929 to examine what was perceived as a rising crime rate and police ineffectiveness in dealing with crime. It is no accident that in looking at those issues, the Wickersham Commission also became the first official governmental body to investigate organized crime.” The many scandals police forces were involved with led to police reform efforts in various cities. “Among the reforms instituted within police organizations were the establishment of selection standards, training for new recruits, placing police under civil service, and awarding promotion resulting from testing procedures. The hope of these reforms was to lessen the hold of politicians, and particularly ward leaders on police officers.” (Potter, n.d.) In the 1950s major effort was placed on professionalizing the police forces in many cities. “Central themes for police administration were to become crime control and efficiency in achieving crime control. Closer supervision of police officers was recommended; foot patrols were replaced by motorized patrols, precinct houses were consolidated and more central police facilities constructed and command functions were centralized in a headquarters staff (Uchida 1993).”

“Within police departments professionalization meant an emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency. Police administrators centralized authority, tightened the chain-of-command, tried to run their departments through the application of arcane, contradictory and often inapplicable rules. A highly authoritarian police bureaucracy not only isolated itself from the public, but from the very police officers whose conduct it was trying to control. By the mid-1960s police officers had responded with an aggressive and widespread police unionization campaign.”

By the 1980s police departments were starting to experiment with community policing.

“Community policing is the latest iteration in efforts to (1) improve relations between the police and the community; (2) decentralize the police; and, (3) in response to the overwhelming body of scholarly literature which finds that the police have virtually no impact on crime, no matter their emphasis or role, provide a means to make citizens feel more comfortable about what has been a seemingly insolvable American dilemma.”

Gary Potter ends his paper with a somewhat disheartening view of the future: “...the role of the police in the United States has been defined by economics and politics, not crime or crime control. As we look to the 21st century, it now appears likely that a new emphasis on science and technology, particularly related to citizen surveillance; a new wave of militarization reflected in the spread of SWAT teams and other paramilitary squads; and a new emphasis on community pacification through community policing, are all destined to replay the failures of history as the policies of the future.”

We are at a moment in time when the issues of policing are center stage. As one would expect, whenever there are mass demonstrations, the question of the role of the police is again part of the public discourse. Peaceful protesters see the role as police protecting their civil rights. Unlike the women's rights and gun control movements, the most recent Black Lives Matter movement is in response to the perceived racist policing methods used by the very police dispatched to assure their right to march. Complicating the matter more are the presence of extreme left-and right-wing self-appointed vigilantes who have decided that peaceful protests do not meet their political objectives. Further complicating the matter is the presence of organized and opportunist looters using the marching as cover for their criminal conduct.

Depending on your perspective as a citizen observer, one can see this in different ways. Some see this as an example of a systematic racial bias on the part of police officers by the way they conduct themselves when stopping and arresting citizens. This perspective sees a broader systematic societal racism and the police as agents of social control to perpetuate an American caste system. They also have low trust in their interaction with police. Others see this as police acting in the appropriate role of protectors by maintaining law and order and safety. They generally believe that police do a good job but do occasionally act inappropriately. They don't normally see a bias towards any particular group of people and do not have much occasion to interact with policeman. Still others unquestioningly take the side of the police and expect them to enforce the law without examining the context.

The Pew Research Center (Center, 2017)² conducted a comprehensive study of public and police attitudes concerning policing in the country. The comparison between what the public thinks and what the police officers think are very instructive in trying to understand our present situation. According to the Pew "Behind the Badge" study, some of key findings are as follows:

- Officers worry about their safety and think the public doesn't understand the risks they face.
- Police are highly committed to their work but say more officers are needed.
- Most officers say their use-of-force guidelines are appropriate and helpful.
- Most officers have had at least some training in key areas of reform.
- Most officers say high-profile incidents have made policing harder.
- Two-thirds of police officers (67%) say the highly publicized fatal encounters between police and blacks are isolated incidents, while 31% describe them as signs of a broader problem.
- A narrow majority of officers (56%) feel that in some neighborhoods being aggressive is more effective than being courteous, while 44% agree or strongly agree that hard, physical tactics are necessary to deal with some people.
- A 56% majority of officers say they have become more callous toward people since taking their job. Younger officers and white officers are more likely than older or black officers to say they have become more callous.

² <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/01/11/behind-the-badge/>

- When both the police and the public are asked whether the public understands the risks and rewards of police work, fully eight-in-ten (83%) of the public say they do, while 86% of police say they don't – the single largest disparity measured in these surveys.
- Large majorities of officers (92%) and the public (79%) say anti-police bias is at least somewhat of a motivation for those protesting the deaths of blacks at the hands of police.
- Majorities of police and the public favor the use of body cameras by officers, though a significantly larger share of the public supports their use (93% vs. 66%) and sees more benefits from body cams than the police do.

It seems clear from the data presented that there is a major disconnect between police and public perceptions of both their work and how it is conducted. It will be important here to dig deeper into the question of the role of the police. I looked at several websites that address this issue and found some interesting responses. An article by Jeremiah Mosteller on a website sponsored by the Charles Koch foundation³ proposes the following:

“The purpose of law enforcement in a free society is to promote public safety and uphold the rule of law so that individual liberty may flourish. Trust and accountability between law enforcement and the communities they are sworn to protect is essential to advancing these goals. The government holds the power to exercise force in achieving its ends, but must do so in a way that protects the rights of community members and upholds the rule of law. Proper policing practices require that law enforcement build positive relationships with their community, respect civil liberties, and avoid tactics that encourage the use of excessive force against citizens.”

The statement emphasizes the idea of trust, the exercise of power, preserving the rights of citizens and upholding the rule of law. It is clear from the appearances of the last five years that these issues have become defining boundaries in which we are witnessing the present situation between the police and people in the community.

It is important to look at the job duties of police officers who have been trusted with the welfare of people in the communities where they live. As there are over 18,000 police departments around the country, we can expect that duties vary. However there many common features among all of these departments.

Typical Police Officer Job Description:⁴

- Serve and protect the citizens
- Attend training seminars on a regular basis
- Patrol specified areas by foot, motorcycle, or car
- Interview witnesses and take notes
- Write traffic citations
- Act as a first responder to emergencies
- Assist in riot controls

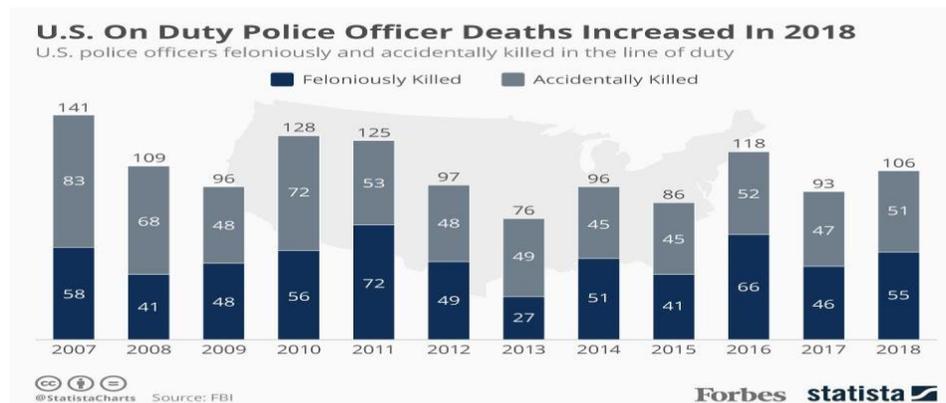
³<https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/issue-areas/criminal-justice-policing-reform/role-of-police-in-america/>

⁴ <http://www.policehow.com/police-officer-job-description.php>

- Attend neighborhood watch programs
- Attend schools to help teach crime prevention
- Search for missing persons
- Direct traffic and escort convoys
- Transport prisoners
- Protect and escort famous athletes, celebrities and politicians
- Respond to domestic disturbances, traffic accidents, & emergency situations
- Watch for law violators/wanted persons and arrest them
- Conduct initial investigations of crime scenes and assist detectives
- Give information to pedestrians and motorists
- Write reports and bulletins
- Serve warrants & subpoenas
- Appear in court to testify

Given the diverse requirements of policemen, it is not unreasonable to ask if they are equipped with the training and academic background to accomplish them. I looked at five large cities and their requirements for eligibility to become a police officer: New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Houston and Chicago. The requirements are generally consistent. All have the requirement for high school education and some require college credits beyond high school or military experience in lieu of college credits. All have the requirement of a minimum age of 21 and some identify a maximum age. Some require American citizenship while several allow persons becoming citizens to apply. Most require living in the city during the time of application but seem to not require continued domicile in the city after becoming a police officer. All require a background check to determine disqualifying criminal records. All require passing cognitive, mental health, physical and oral examinations. Once police officers meet these preliminary requisites, they then attend a police academy and successfully complete the Academy requirements before becoming police officers.⁵ After completion of academy training, police officers are required to take periodic in-service training.

A major issue for police officers centers around the violence they face in their everyday work.



⁵ <https://www.how-to-become-a-police-officer.com/#cities>

A recent shooting of policeman in Tulsa Oklahoma is an example of how a routine police stop of a vehicle ends up in tragedy for the officers. This graphic video gives us a clear view of what police officers face when they are forced to assert their authority to ensure public safety. It may be a window into why so many officers are quick to use weapons when confronting people. It also raises the question of the responsibility of individuals stopped by police officers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYxBOhhahyA&bpctr=1600808455>

If you look at the chart above you see that roughly 50 police officers a year lose their lives in felony encounters, while another 50 are accidentally killed in the line of duty. A recent Washington Examiner article⁶ reported that “A 2019 survey by the Police Executive Research Forum found that fewer people were becoming police officers and more officers were taking early retirement. Sixty-six percent of police departments nationwide reported a drop in recruitment numbers. The study called it a ‘crisis.’ A year later, it threatens to become a full-blown catastrophe.” The article goes on to talk about the decline in applications among African-Americans, leading to a reduction in their numbers in the overall police force. Many of them feel unfairly targeted by the Black Lives Matters movement.

There is growing concern about how police officers carry out their duties when weapons are used in interactions with civilians. Taking a careful look at this will require a comprehensive inclusive national database that at the present time does not exist. The most comprehensive data collected on deadly police encounters is being collected by the Washington Post.⁷ More recently, the Federal Bureau of investigations is working on a more comprehensive database that will include more in-depth analysis of all police cases where weapons are fired by policeman. However, this will require over 18,000 police forces in the country to cooperate.⁸

In a 2015 article in the nation⁹ entitled “When can police use lethal force against a fleeing suspect” the question is raised and answered “Is there a federal legal standard to judge the appropriateness of police use of force? The Supreme Court held in a 1989 case, *Graham v. Connor*, that the appropriateness of use of force by officers ‘must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene,’ rather than evaluated through 20/20 hindsight. That standard is designed to take into account that police officers are frequently asked to make split-second decisions during fast-evolving confrontations, and should not be subject to overly harsh second guessing. The Justice Department cited that legal threshold last month when it declined to prosecute former Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death last summer of an unarmed black 18-year-old.”

⁶ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/cops-out>

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

⁸ <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/use-of-force>

⁹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/can-police-use-lethal-force-fleeing-suspect>

A major question that is being asked by the public today is whether or not African-Americans are being unfairly targeted by police actions that include deadly force. The Washington Post police shooting database clearly shows that African-Americans have been shot at three times the rate of whites over a period of five years. However, researchers from Harvard University conducted an empirical study and found there were no racial disparities.¹⁰ But when the study is looked at more carefully, there are serious sampling issues, which point to the difficulty in collecting accurate data about policing. If you preview this following YouTube presentation you get a better understanding of the issue of data collection.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxvcPouz3kw>

We have all seen the videos of unarmed black males being shot by policeman. A compilation of videos is available by clicking onto the following site.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html?referringSource=articleShare>

Such encounters with police are also experienced by white citizens. Following is a partial list of videos from YouTube of unarmed white citizens being shot by police:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ooa7wOKHhg> unarmed white man shot by police

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0-oSrLzvIo> 40-year-old white woman from Australia shot by police

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mRhmFcjs4M> white deaf man shot by police

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1iZFxkxr6w six-year-old autistic child shot by police

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLVqvYJqATQ> white male with mental health issues shot by police

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mezvCg0A5c> 25-year-old white man shot in the back by police

In addition, black and white citizens with mental health problems are much more at risk of being shot by police. Some police departments have advocates who can be called upon during a police emergency. You can look at a good discussion of this issue at the following web address:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTJl88Hp8u4>

Consideration must be given to the culture within which they work. Americans are naturally suspicious of authority of any type when it comes to their personal interests and activities. Police officers represent authority, thus working in a profession that runs counter to American culture. When it suits our purposes and safety, we reach out for police assistance. However, when we are being confronted for engaging in activities that run counter to the law, our natural inclination is to resist. David Brooks recently wrote a piece for the Atlantic that looks at the cultures of many police agencies and how it affects the way they work. This is an excellent synopsis and should be

¹⁰ https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/empirical_analysis_tables_figures.pdf

read for this seminar. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/how-police-brutality-gets-made/613030/>

Our discussion today should focus on both objective data and the personal and emotional responses of people who are experiencing policing either as the agent of authority or those who are expected to submit peacefully to such authority. This raises a number of questions for discussion:

- Do you have a good understanding and empathy for the work of a police officer?
- What are reasonable behaviors for both policeman and citizens being stopped for a possible violation of the law?
- How can we understand the ambivalence poor people in high crime communities have towards the police?
- What issues have people in black communities experienced in interactions with the police?
- What is your understanding from the videos you have seen of police deadly actions against both black-and-white citizens?
- What role does easy access to deadly weapons play in the hands of both police officers and citizens in the managing of law enforcement?
- Is there a need to change the job description of police work? If so, what changes could be made?

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