

Name

Professor

Course

Date

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## Creating New Relationships Between Communities and the Police

### *Introduction*

It is at least arguable that there exists an adversarial relationship between the police and communities. More exactly, it is noted that many citizens fear the police and/or perceive them as unduly concerned with exerting their authority. Community policing has to an extent eased these tensions, but studies consistently reveal that most people are still greatly intimidated by the law. There are concerns about racial profiling, sexism, and other inappropriate practices. The larger reality, nonetheless, is that those responsible for protecting the people are widely perceived by those people as focused more on their own power. More to the point, this is essentially an unnatural social relationship. Ideally, there should be a sense of mutual trust between the police and the community, particularly as law enforcement is in place to serve the people. To that end, it is necessary that police departments revise how they function in this regard. While the public has some responsibility in addressing this problem, the greater factor is that the police, holding the authority, are more obligated to create change. Ultimately, it is necessary that law enforcement officers make significant efforts to improve their attitudes, the relationships with communities and individuals, and lessen the conflicts, fears, and tensions generally felt by the public.

### *Discussion*



As noted, the police exist to protect the public, prevent crime, apprehend criminals, and basically ensure safety. Without question, many police departments accomplish these objectives, and in professional, ethical ways. At the same time, however, and increasingly in recent years, there is a distinct and negative quality to how the police are perceived. Many are not reassured by the presence of law enforcement; rather, they are wary, uneasy, and fearful. It is likely that this is largely due to how so many officers seem to enjoy exhibiting their standing and authority. At the risk of generalization, it happens that police officers often adopt attitudes that are at least partially demeaning to the citizens they interrogate. As noted, race is a major factor here, as large numbers of African Americans and other minorities believe any police intervention regarding them is based on mistrust and an unjust idea that minorities are inherently dangerous. Beyond this, however, the same reality pertains to the public in general. By and large, the public does not trust law enforcement as it should. This defies the basic role of the police as it undermines how the society functions. A police officer should be welcomed by the citizen in any circumstance, but what happens far more is that the presence of the officer creates fear.

The reasons for the above are multiple. For example, and for decades, there has been evidence of law enforcement exceeding its authority. This has occurred, and occurs, in how the police deal with protests. In all fairness, officers are usually under instructions from their superiors to react to even peaceful protests in aggressive ways. This translates to harassment of protesters sometimes taking physical form, from the use of clubs to tear gas. The media reports on these incidents and public mistrust increases. Moreover, there is a sense in the public that law enforcement pursues agendas which are either unnecessary or only based upon antiquated policies and the need to observe laws that are meaningless. Untold numbers of drivers, for example, experience something like dread when made to pull over and be questioned by the

police. All of these elements combine to generate a schism between the public and the law. This, again, must damage the society. It is also likely that this adversarial quality only enhances the officers' senses of empowerment. Mistrust fuels mistrust and the police are then all the more inclined to exert their power.

It is also important to recognize the extent of those powers, as well as how the public perceives them. Today, law enforcement has more discretionary ability than perhaps ever before. Officers are able to interrogate anyone if they believe there is anything suspect about them. They will sometimes bully, in fact, which is an extension of an undue display of authority. Law enforcement may also arrest based on suspicion only, no matter a lack of evidence. If, again, these are generalizations, it must be reiterated that many studies support that this is how the public views the police. It appears to be very much about intimidation, so the relationships between communities and the law become all the more strained. This is especially true as the citizen feels powerless in the face of police authority. The primary point is that none of this is helpful to the society as a whole. This ongoing conflict contradicts the most basic purpose and structure of law enforcement, and it is grossly irrational that the public should have adverse reactions to any police presence.

Given the current nature of the relationship between the public and law enforcement, change is vitally needed. As noted, the larger responsibility for this rests on the police, and simply because they are the ones holding the greater power. It is true that sensitivity training and other means of adjusting police attitudes and behaviors are implemented in various departments, but far more is needed. To begin with, the immense issue of racial profiling must be addressed within departments. If the law sanctions or permits this activity, it must be seen by law enforcement that this only exacerbates tensions. As is commonly known, many African

Americans refer to “DWB”; they are pulled over for “driving while black.” If this is not necessarily always a fair assessment, the reality is that it also must be based on some experience. Beyond this, the law must confront the fact that racial profiling accomplishes very little, if anything. Targeting blacks and minorities is unethical and invalid, simply because targeting anyone will likely reveal cause for suspicion.

Apart from the above, there should be a general emphasis within police departments going to a specific agenda. More exactly, and rather than encouraging officers to forge better relationships with communities, what should be far more stressed is the need for officers themselves to alter behaviors when encountering the public. There are, of course, many excellent and ethical police officers. At the same time, however, there is as well a vast number of officers who insist upon exploiting their own positions and power. The real change, then, must derive from police recruitment and training. Arguably, there is a fiercely masculine and aggressive quality to the police, at least traditionally. There is no place for that in today’s world, and it is in the best interests of both the public and the law to end what so consistently creates conflict.

### *Conclusion*

There is no escaping the reality that the public has a negative and/or fearful sense of law enforcement. This can only impede efforts of the police to enforce law, just as it reflects a greatly unhealthy facet of the society. The police should be welcomed and not feared. For this to evolve, it is then necessary that officers change, just as recruitment must be done with greater care. The police must always be responsible for upholding the law, of course, but what matters here are the ways in which this is so frequently done. Ultimately, it is necessary that law enforcement officers make real efforts to improve their attitudes, change their relationships with communities and individuals, and lessen the conflicts, fears, and tensions within the public.