

## **On Reforming Police Services**

Jack R. Greene, PhD  
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice  
Northeastern University, Boston

March 2016

Over the past year or so the underbelly of American policing has been captured on cell phone cameras and video revealing the oftentimes heavy handedness of the police, especially toward minority groups, and most especially toward young black males. In a series of incidents in big and smaller cities police use of force, especially lethal force, and aggressive street tactics has led to calls for greater police oversight and acknowledgement that “Black Lives Matter”. A Presidential Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing made important recommendation for reigning in the scope and ferocity of police action, increasing police oversight and systematically improving police and minority community interactions.

### **The Paths to Police Reform**

The American police have been the subject of investigation for over 100 years. We have come to understand policing, in its urban, suburban and rural forms, as well as the broader political, social and economic currents which affect police strategy and tactics. In some important ways democratic policing is at a crossroad, mired in a series of “wars” on crime, drugs, gangs and guns, which have conditioned an oftentimes aggressive posture of the police. The “crime attack” model of policing has ever so slowly become dominant in American policing, crowding out other “models” of police service such as community and problem-oriented policing. Public moral panics, coupled with a militarization of domestic policing in the name of crime and terrorism, has put police transparency and hence the institutional legitimacy of the police in jeopardy. To be sure the police must deal with crime and disorder, in its menial and violent forms, and as a result the police must be cautious. Nonetheless, the problems of social, political and economic inequality put the police on a collision course with improved community safety. In the late 1960s the Kerner Commission on Civil Unrest suggested that the proximate actions of the police invariably sparked the fire of urban riots, but the tinder for that fire was the product of civic neglect, estrangement and marginalization. The admonition that failure to learn from history likely reproduces historical mistakes should guide thought and actions about police reform today.

Three paths to improving democratic police practice are offered here. These paths are rooted in much literature and research on the police and may offer some perspective for reform. First and foremost they call for the police, ensnared in a hole of public resentment and content, to stop digging, and shift attention to their interactions with the community, leading to three paths discussed here; 1) abandoning the “crime attack” model as the central framework for policing, 2) improving police and community interaction including oversight of police actions, and 3) focusing on policing marginalized communities.

### **Crime Attack Should Not Be the Central Framework for Policing**

Crime attack policing is overly aggressive and largely indiscriminate street policing has come to crowd out other forms of democratic policing seeking to build social capital, community cohesion and primary police interventions. Despite rhetoric to the contrary the police are not the first line of defense against disorder and crime; rather they are imbedded in larger webs of social control. In other service sectors this recognition is clear – medicine is not the first line of defense against illness or injury and teachers are not the first line of defense against illiteracy. Police crime attack approaches operate on a rather dated set of ideas about deterrence and decision making, which would be better served in a community and problem-oriented policing as well as a restorative justice framework. The police simply cannot prevent or deter the problems of deviance, disorder and crime through arrest and aggressive street tactics alone. To be sure there are times and places where police use of restraint and force are necessary. Nevertheless, when the central, most visible and most powerful emphasis of the police is on suppressing crime, engagement with the public will be fraught with fear, suspicion and distrust, much of which is evidenced today. Balancing crime prevention, addressing a wide array of community problems, responding to emergencies and crises, and providing reassurance to communities and people who have suffered harm must find their way back into a broader definition of the police and social control. .

### **Improving Democratic Oversight of the Police is Fundamental**

The police are the only civil agency afforded the authority to intervene in civic affairs with lethal force. The application of governmental force is the cornerstone of public policing and with public acceptance of police interventions as long as they too are lawful. Operating under the rule of law, the police must uphold the law, while being controlled by the same law that governs all. Police legitimacy comes in part from a process of public acceptance of the police as agents of formal social control who will be fair and impartial in their application of the law. Some of this legitimacy is established and/or reinforced in police transactions with the community (e.g. stopping, questioning and helping), while much of this legitimacy is contextually derived in the historical and current relationships between the police and the public. Communities that distrust the police do so in part on their historical experience with the police. More immediately, there is no legal footing or social acceptance of “street justice”.

To assure that the police are conditioned and constrained by the rule of law, oversight of the police, given their extraordinary powers, requires that police agencies must be transparent and accountable, each requiring public input and review. Public access to police policy and procedure, review of critical incidents, and public advice on matters of policing style and community interaction is a necessary component of democratic policing. Simply out, policing is too important to be overseen by the police alone.

### **Policing Marginalized Communities Needs Social and Contextual Awareness**

It is historically and currently the case that the police are drawn to communities with social, order and crime problems. Police deployment takes these considerations into account when assigning times and places for police attention. Recent computer-assisted crime analytics have accelerated this process. Unfortunately, much of what passes as police analytics is largely crime centric that is focused on crime, not other activities and interventions that the police regularly provide communities. As this has occurred definitions of police service delivery have been narrowed to crime interventions and conflictual police interactions with most communities, but most particularly with marginalized communities. The police provide many services within communities and their crime responses are reasonably a fraction of their total interactions with the public. Yet an ecological fallacy has accompanied crime approaches wherein places with crime problems gets translated into people who are criminal. Such a leap weakens community confidence in the police and shapes a negative stereotype of community membership.

Communities are dynamic and so police interventions in these communities have to account for such dynamics.

One-size-fits-all policing, coupled with being police insensitive to local conditions, invariably results in furthering the distance and trust between communities and the police. This was true in the late 1960s and is true today.

(1185 Words)