

VOX POPULI

Policing: People, Empathy and the Future



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The author is the young adults group leader of the Greater Los Angeles JACL. He gave the following presentation to a virtual program/meeting of the chapter on May 16.

In the last decade, American police forces have repeatedly come under scrutiny for their actions, which range from brutality and harassment to manslaughter and murder. Much of the controversy that we see today stems from these terrible breaches of law and due process. We will discuss the cause and potential solutions to this extremely nuanced and complex issue.

What is the purpose of the police? According to the American Bar Association, the roles of the police include stopping and preventing crime, safeguarding lives, protecting constitutional guarantees, assisting those who cannot care for themselves, resolving conflict, creating and maintaining a feeling of security in the community, and promoting peace and civil order among others.

Recognizing the roles of the police will help us better define what the law enforcement institution is doing well, and what it can do to improve.

According to Dr. Andrew Goldsmith, a professor of law from Flinders University, public trust is a key factor that influences the effectiveness of the police. In the context of law enforcement, trust is the confidence that the populace has in the police to lawfully fulfill its duty and to do what is right.

Each controversial action by law enforcement that makes its way into the public consciousness leads to the erosion of public trust. Distrust in the police leads to hostility and non-compliance, which results in less efficient policing and a higher risk of violent interactions with the public, which leads to more mistrust. The salient question is: How can the police regain the public's trust?

Police demilitarization is one policy that can improve the public's confidence in the police. Imagine that you are walking down the street and you see a police officer walking towards you. The officer is wearing a military-style helmet and a face shield, and carries military-grade weaponry. Equipment that seems more at home on a battlefield than the streets of your town or city. Gazing at the officer, what do you feel? Trust, security, and peace? Or distrust, unease, and fear? For many, the police are not seen as beacons of peace and order, but as an occupying force.

Dr. Casey Delehanty, a professor of global studies at Gardner-Webb University, found that police forces that adopt overly militarized weapons and tactics are more likely to cause civilian deaths than their less militarized counterparts. Militarization has the greatest effect on communities of color as they are disproportionately targeted. These communities that are affected by these needless deaths lose trust in the police, which subsequently leads to reduced effectiveness of law enforcement.

Another method to improve public confidence in the police is the implementation of a community policing model. According to the U.N. Centre for Human Settlements, community policing promotes a closer relation with the population by having closer contact with civilians and developing local knowledge of an area. More interaction and cooperation between the community and police will help build trust and a willingness to exchange information regarding crime.

This, in turn, makes it easier to devise strategies to combat problems that face a community. According to a study from LMU that interviewed Los Angeles residents, 88.2% of Angelenos support community policing.

The last method that I will discuss is reforming police training. The current training that officers receive tends to emphasize the warrior aspect of policing rather than keeping the peace, says David Gutierrez of the *Harvard Political Review*. Firearms training takes precedence over non-lethal weapons training and conflict management. The focus on the use of force rather than de-escalation contributes to higher rates of violent interactions between police and civilians.

Additionally, the standard for training officers varies wildly from state to state and even within states, according to an interview by NPR. Creating a national standard for training police officers and emphasizing de-escalation will reduce avoidable deaths and help officers build a better relationship with the communities they protect.

It is easy to criticize the inadequacies of the police while looking from an outsider's perspective, but to have a meaningful discussion, we must understand the thoughts and feelings of police officers. We cannot disregard the fact that policing is an extremely challenging and stressful profession. Pew found that police officers believe that only 14% of the population understand the challenges that they face in the line of duty.

Additionally, the generalized and indiscriminate hatred of police officers, particularly on social media, although a valid expression of frustration at law enforcement's inequity, is not conducive to change. Instead, it creates an adversarial relationship between those who want reforms and the police and their supporters.

These considerations, coupled with the fact that poorly conceived changes to policing may put officers' lives at risk, demonstrates why it is rational for officers to oppose change. By acknowledging the struggles and fears that officers hold, we can start a meaningful discussion that can hopefully lead to systemic police reforms. In the end, we must remember that police officers are still people like you or I.

In today's society, it is very easy to find oneself in an echo chamber that reiterates the same political stance day in and day out, especially when discussing divisive topics such as law enforcement. As you go forward, I urge you to acknowledge the opinions and rationales of both sides and to seek out opposing viewpoints. Looking at this topic holistically and empathetically will allow us to respectfully discuss with those who don't agree with us.

Through discourse, we can devise reforms that will truly benefit communities and change the current policing system for the better. We mustn't settle for a world where people are killed because of the color of their skin by the organizations that are supposed to protect them.

The opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of The Rafu Shimpo.