Improving Policing: Criticisms and Supports

Hannah M. Stephens
West Virginia University at Parkersburg

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In recent years, policing in America has been the subject of much scrutiny, and this has had negative effects, both on the public and the police officers of the United States. Because of the growing backlash and hatred toward law enforcement, police officers are hesitant to perform their duties, for fear of public anger being aimed toward them (Bandler, 2016). People are questioning whether or not they can trust police, amid various allegations of police misconduct. This can lead to distrust, paranoia, and hesitancy to report problems (Ware, 2018). It is clear that something must be done to mend the once-strong bond between these two entities, but how can this be accomplished? There is growing criticism over policing issues involving corruption, excessive use of force, and racial tensions. To resolve this, police can better improve their working performance and their relationship with the public by receiving additional education, utilizing various approaches to crime, and understanding the intended roles of policing.

Corruption

Corruption and misconduct in the policing system have become sources of major concern for many people. Although corruption occurs in every profession, police corruption is a topic that has received much attention and needs to be addressed. There are many types of corruption, ranging from accepting small gratuities to participating in violent crimes (Schmalleger, 2017). Major instances involving brutality, drug trafficking, bribery, and extortion, however, have caused most of the alarm in recent years. Why do these things occur? There have been several proposed factors that may contribute to police corruption, including ethics, as well as opportunities and pressure.

Ethics

A code of ethics is essential for police officers to possess. Ethics are what allow for sound judgement and wise actions, as well as strength to stand up against corruptive temptations. Without strong ethical standards, officers will find it very easy to slip into corruption and misconduct. Integrity accounts for a significant part of ethical standards. According to Vicchio (1997) of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), prudence, trust, effacement of self-interests, courage, intellectual honesty, justice, and responsibility are essential virtues that make up integrity. These virtues are extremely important for being a fair and ethical individual. If a person, especially a police officer, is lacking in integrity, the results could be disastrous. This has been acknowledged by numerous entities, including the FBI, the United States Department of Justice, and the California Innocence Project. Timothy Roufa (2019) accurately states the consequences a lack of ethics could have, both on police and communities:

When officers fail to do what's right, and especially when they do what is clearly and blatantly wrong, they violate police ethics, erode the public trust, and further degrade law enforcement's ability to work within the community and carry out its mission. Adherence to high ethical standards is as vital to achieving the overall goal of modern policing as any other tactic, technique or practice. (para. 12)

Ethics and integrity are pillars on which proper policing rests. As discussed, their importance cannot be overlooked.

Opportunities and Pressure

Police officers are human beings, and as such, they are not immune to moral challenges. Throughout their careers, officers are constantly bombarded with corruptive influencers (Martin, 2011). Consequently, some may fall victim to the lures of actions such as bribery, extortion, drug

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trafficking, and other forms of misconduct after being exposed to them for a prolonged period of time. Pressures from other outside forces may also contribute to police corruption. Much of this pressure comes from within the police department itself, which may include that of expectations and work environment (Martin, 2011). Departments are not allowed to possess or enforce "quotas," but in many areas, there have been motivators and pressures put in place to encourage a higher number of arrests, ticketing, solved cases, and the like (Rose, 2015). As stated in an FBI article, "in police work, results are measured in such terms as the number of arrests and the number of weapons and drugs recovered" (Martin, 2011, para. 15). Often, higher numbers in things like arrests and ticketing mean more money, allowing cities and departments to receive more equipment and funding (Rose, 2015). These "quotas" may cause some officers to make hasty decisions in order to add to the numbers, such as writing large numbers of tickets (Rose, 2015). This pressure for increased toughness on ticketing and arrests leads to the deterioration of public trust (Rose, 2015). Pressures from an officer's superiors also have the potential for encouraging corruption. If an individual is surrounded by negative attitudes and degrading criticism of both superiors and coworkers, it becomes a form of peer pressure, leading some officers to commit corruptive acts in order to satisfy what is demanded of them (Martin, 2011).

Excessive Use of Force

Police use of force has also become a great source of unease for many. With instances of excessive force being increasingly publicized, tensions have risen dramatically. Officers are given authority to use force when necessary, but some take this power too far. In light of this, controversy has formed over whether police should be granted as much power as they have (Dunham & Alpert, 2010). In connection, people's attention has been drawn to the use of force continuum and to problems that surround the use of excessive force.

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The Use of Force Continuum

The use of force continuum is a chart illustrating the levels of force that are used in various circumstances. Some sources have slight variations, but most models list six levels of force: officer presence, verbal commands, physical control, other soft techniques, hard techniques, and deadly force (Schmalleger, 2017). In most police/public interactions, use of force is not used (Schmalleger, 2016). In cases where some force is necessary, verbal communication and soft techniques are usually enough to achieve control of the situation. Soft techniques include physical control, such as wrist locks; chemical substances, such as pepper spray; and takedowns. Hard techniques are used less often, but include impact weapons, strikes, and holds. Deadly force is the most dangerous, and it includes the use of firearms and strikes to vital areas of the body. Many use of force models also include the perceived level of resistance that would require each type of force. This is important because officers must only use the minimum amount of force necessary to diffuse a situation (Schmalleger, 2016).

Problems with Excessive Force

Although in the overall scheme of policing, a relatively low proportion of interactions with police result in excessive force, it is a growing concern that needs to be addressed. It can be difficult to track use of force by officers, but information provided by distinguished criminal justice author Frank Schmalleger (2016) states that only about 1.6% of encounters with police involve force. That being said, it does still occur and is a valid concern. Police policy regarding use of force is also a concerning factor. Research has found that many American cities do not employ restrictions or strategies that could potentially decrease the number of officer-related shootings (Police Use of Force Project, n.d.). That same research showed that the cities which

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did possess restrictions on use of force had "significantly fewer killings" than the cities that did not (Police Use of Force Project, n.d.).

Racial Tensions

In addition to corruption and use of force, racial tensions between police and individuals have also caused widespread alarm. Discrimination against minorities is something that cannot be ignored. There are several factors that encourage racial tensions, from brutality to profiling.

Publicized Instances of Discrimination and Brutality

Many publicized instances of police brutality occur with people of color, most often African Americans, as the victim. Many cases also go hand-in-hand with excessive use of force problems. Some of the most well-known cases are those of Rodney King, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray. In 1991, Rodney King was severely beaten by police after being pulled over for driving under the influence (Sastry & Bates, 2017). The beating lasted approximately fifteen minutes, with four officers directly involved and several others on looking (Sastry & Bates, 2017). In 2014, Eric Garner was put into an illegal chokehold by an officer, which resulted in his death (Dianis, 2014). NBC News reported that Garner was not fighting police but was simply asking why he was being stopped (Dianis, 2014). Another incident occurred in 2015, with the death of Freddie Gray. After being arrested by police, Gray was dragged into a van and later found to have a spinal cord injury that resulted in his death (Pegues, 2016). These cases and others have led to outrage and riots among the public, drastically damaging the police-public relationship.

Discrepancies and Profiling

There is a wide array of problems in regard to discrepancies and racial profiling in the criminal justice system. According to *Psychology Today* and other entities, with the majority of

police officers being of Caucasian decent, understanding and interacting with minority

individuals can prove difficult because of a difference in culture and background, as well as the

presence of bias (Schmalleger, 2017; Williams, 2014). This can lead to increases in racial

tensions and discrimination, whether intentional or not. Multiple scholars cite the fact that

minority individuals are more likely to be subjected to traffic stops and searches (Schmalleger,

2017). Both Frank Schmalleger (2017) and The Sentencing Project (2018) add that African

American arrests are disproportionate to the percentage of the population they make up,

suggesting discrimination. The Sentencing Project (2018) article stated:

> Nationwide surveys reveal disparities in the outcomes of police stops. Once
>
> pulled over, black and Hispanic drivers were three times as likely as whites to be
>
> searched (6% and 7% versus 2%) and blacks were twice as likely as whites to be
>
> arrested. These patterns hold even though police officers generally have a lower
>
> "contraband hit rate" when they search black versus white drivers. (para. 15)

This information brings to light that even though minority individuals are searched more often,

they are less likely to possess illegal materials than white individuals.

Education

In response to these dominant issues, one way police officers may help restore good

policing and a healthy relationship with the public is by receiving additional education. There are

many advantages to this. Education makes officers aware of various problems and gives them

some tools necessary to address them. According to researchers from Michigan State University,

officers with more education are "less likely to be involved in unethical behavior,…less likely to

use force as the first response,"…and more likely to show increased skills in communication,

technology, problem solving, and adaptability (Bond, 2014, para. 5). Major subjects that police

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would benefit from learning about include improving community relationships, dealing with mental health, and understanding crime.

Strategies for Improving Police-Community Relations

There are several ways police can learn how to better their relationship with the public. Police are to be part of the communities they serve. This not only helps to build trust, but also results in more willing public participation and understanding (Loving, 2017). When two entities come together to help one another, it is easier to identify with each other's hardships and triumphs, leading to less criticism and more support. Police can involve themselves in their communities by participating in community activities, interacting with individuals, performing additional public service outside of their job description, and learning about cultural awareness (Loving, 2017). Taking part in community activities, such as school programs and town celebrations, let individuals see who police officers really are outside of the uniform (Loving, 2017). Interacting with individuals by taking the time to talk to people outside of enforcing the law also allows people to see that officers care about the people they serve (Hodges, 2019; Loving, 2017). Finally, when people see officers taking the time to go above and beyond their duties, it has a lasting impact. There have been countless stories of officers sacrificing their own time and resources to help someone or volunteer in their communities, and this does so much to gain back the public's trust (Loving, 2017). Cultural awareness has also become a large topic, with negative racial encounters becoming more prevalent. Having an understanding of different cultures that individuals are a part of helps develop empathy and may help decrease discrimination, both on the part of police and the public (Loving, 2017).

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Addressing Mental Health

The subject of mental health and police is a sensitive one. Many people have no idea how to interact with individuals struggling with mental health problems, which may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. This is why it is important for police officers to receive training in the areas of Mental Health First Aid, de-escalation techniques, and self-care. Mental Health First Aid provides a series of tools designed to help better understand what one is going through and be able to help him or her through a current situation (Shingleton, 2016). Through Mental Health First Aid, individuals struggling can be helped by officers, rather than be subdued and arrested (Shingleton, 2016). De-escalation techniques are also a valuable asset to police officers. Through their use, officers are able to diffuse a situation and calm an individual down, instead of adding to the tension by yelling commands or using physical force (Shingleton, 2016; Best, 2019). De-escalation may take longer to enact than use of force or other tactics, but the results are phenomenal. In addition to addressing the mental health of others, officers must also consider their own mental health. Policing is a dangerous and difficult occupation, with its rewards and hardships. Officers often see the worst of people, and this can lead to depression, cynicism, and other problems (Envisage Technologies, 2016). Taking time to de-stress results in better working performance and mood.

Understanding Crime

Crime occurs for a variety of reasons and understanding what those reasons are helps officers better address the underlying issues. There are different ways this can come about. Statistics are a valuable resource of information that can be used for a variety of reasons, ranging from gaining funds to organizing a response (Schmalleger, 2017). Statistics can show how much of a crime occurs, where a crime most often occurs, and how a crime most often occurs. If police

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recognize the trends present in data, they can adjust their responses to different areas and form different tactics accordingly. Motives for committing crime are also of great interest and eliminating those motives would do a great deal to prevent crime caused by them. For example, if theft in a certain area is due mainly to necessity, such as food for a homeless family, police and the community can come together to help end that need by instilling food programs or other methods. Not only could this positively impact individuals and cut down on that particular crime, but it also encourages community bonds.

<h2 align="center">Approaches to Crime</h2>

Recognizing and discerning among various approaches to policing also may improve relationships and policing as a whole. How police chose to approach various circumstances often makes the difference between aggravating a situation and relieving it. The major components of approaches to crime are the styles and strategies police choose to implement.

Styles of Policing

There are three major styles of policing: legalistic, watchman, and service. Each places a focus on a different aspect of policing. The legalistic style emphasizes exactly what the law says and most of the time does not allow for much officer discretion (Schmalleger, 2017). It incorporates a "zero tolerance" policy and tends to avoid disputes that are not necessarily illegal (Schmalleger, 2017). The watchman style does allow for officer discretion in addition to the law, and its subscribers are primarily concerned with keeping the peace and public order (Schmalleger, 2017). Similar to the watchman style in the service style, which is aimed at helping others, rather than strictly enforcing the law (Schmalleger, 2017). This style allows for the widest use of officer discretion, which means officers can choose how to handle a situation,

in lieu of only observing the actions that policy lays out. A well-balanced approach to crime will yield the best results.

Strategies of Policing

There are many modern strategies that police use in an attempt to make their profession more efficient. Utilizing the proper strategies in a specific area has the potential to do just that. Though there are many others, three basic strategies are those of intelligence-led policing, problem-oriented policing, and community-oriented policing. According to a Kent State University article, intelligence-led policing involves "advanced data analytics, community involvement, and collaboration with other law enforcement agencies and organizations" (Kent State University, 2020, para 1). Much of this policing approach revolves around gathering data and using it to implement better responses to crime (Kent State University, 2020). Problem-oriented policing does as its name suggests: identifies problematic components that contribute to crime (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). By gathering information, police are then able to utilize and direct community resources toward problem areas to "prevent and reduce crime" (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). Lastly, community-oriented policing focuses on cultivating a relationship with the public, so police and individuals can work together to reduce crime (Schmalleger, 2017).

Roles of Policing

Lastly, to restore the former state of policing and public relationships, both officers and the public must also once-again realize the original, intended roles of policing. Over time, some of the roles have been forgotten, resulting in a break away from values that were once held. Police have numerous roles, some of which are enforcing the law, investigating and

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apprehending criminals, maintaining order, and most importantly, preventing crime and being part of the community that they serve.

Enforcing the Law and Apprehending Offenders

Most people are familiar with a police officer's role of enforcing the law and arresting criminals. Both of these roles are vital for public safety, as violating laws can be dangerous, both to the offender and others. Enforcing the law is not always about warnings and arrests, however. Officers can also enforce the law by assisting someone in avoiding a crime (Schmalleger, 2017). For example, an officer may wait outside a bar in the evening and watch a drunk individual stumble outside toward his or her car. The officer can then choose to do one of two things: wait until the individual starts driving and then pull him or her over for a DUI or walk up to the individual and offer a ride home. By doing this, the officer is both enforcing the law and preventing a crime from occurring (Schmalleger, 2017).

Maintaining Order

Another important duty of policing is to maintain public order or keep the peace. This can take on many forms, from supervising gatherings to addressing quality-of-life offenses. Public gatherings, such as protests and demonstrations, sometimes involve violence or disruption, making police presence necessary (Schmalleger, 2017). Quality-of-life offenses are described as minor crimes that disturb the peace (Schmalleger, 2017). Common instances include loud noise, vandalism, and panhandling, which, in excessive cases, may require police intervention (Schmalleger, 2017).

Preventing Crime

One of the most forgotten-about roles of policing is that of prevention. Too often, people measure police performance on arrests and other things, when in actuality, the original goal was to prevent crime, not just respond to it (Law Enforcement Action Partnership, n.d.; Martin, 2011). It is imperative that both the police and the public remember this role and instill its values back into policing through education and grant programs intended to fund crime prevention (Schmalleger, 2017).

Being Part of the Community

Finally, as mentioned previously, police need to come together and be part of their community. Forming a bond with community members not only strengthens trust and understanding, but also makes policing more effective, because individuals are willing to work with police instead of fighting against them. According to Mosteller (n.d.), forming a tie through community policing also "reduces crime and fears of crime as well as perceptions of policing discrimination. At the same time, it increases public satisfaction of police and increases positive attitudes toward officers" (para. 10). This would be an invaluable asset to police, and as such, needs to be recognized once again.

Conclusion

Because of the many controversial issues surrounding policing, it is important that officers are aware of how they can improve both their performance and their relationship with the communities they serve. As the policing profession has evolved, the term "law enforcement," has begun to replace the term "policing" (Schmalleger, 2017). This mindset has only encouraged moving away from the principles upon which policing was founded. Policing is not the same thing as law enforcement, and this must be remembered. Each have different goals and different values. Law enforcement is often concentrated on only enforcing the laws, while policing (a

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branch of law enforcement) is focused on communities and preventing crime (Schmalleger,

2017). Police departments must return to their roots, rather than become more structured around

rigid policies. Instances of corruption, excessive use of force, and racial discrimination have

fueled this dramatic impact on policing, and it is important that this trend be reversed by utilizing

education, various approaches to crime, and the original roles of police.

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