

MODULE 3:  
LAW ENFORCEMENT AND RACE RELATIONS 2020

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The American law enforcement community has faced many challenges in its difficult history. It has risen from infancy of the Watch System in Boston 1636, which “composed of community volunteers whose primary duty was to warn of impending danger” (Potter, p.1). By the 1830’s the transition to a “centralized municipal police department first emerged in the United States” (Potter, p.1). The role of policing in our history included “Slave catchers” of the 1700’s. The southern states of the nation used these resources “to chase down, apprehend, and return (runaway slaves) to their owners (Potter, p.2).

In the Political Era of the late 1800’s to the 1920’s, police officers “had limited supervision and an enormous amount of discretion. Because police officers worked alone or in small groups, there was ample opportunities to shake down peddlers and small businesses. Officers allowed gamblers, pick (pockets) and thieves to go about their business in return for a share of proceedings. This structure led to a culture of police corruption and a reform was needed” (Community policing).

The Professional era of policing from the 1920’s to the 1970’s transitioned once again as “the radio car was introduced and many police officers were taken off their foot posts and put into cars” (Community policing). The loss of foot patrols and the focus on response to crimes in progress, apprehension, and crime control became the primary emphasis. “The professional era of policing led to the police not knowing their communities and a sub-culture of “us vs. them” (Community policing).

As the focus of crime reduction and lobbying for police professionalism in the 20th century grew, “crime historian Samuel Walker’s *The Police in America: An Introduction* argues that the move toward professionalism wasn’t all good: that movement, he argues, promoted the creation of police departments that were ‘inward-looking’ and ‘isolated from the public,’ and crime-control tactics that ended up exacerbating tensions between police and the communities they watch over” (Waxman).

We currently find ourselves in a period that relies on community policing efforts and positive neighborhood engagement that would’ve seemed like a foreign notion only a few

decades ago. Nationwide, police agencies have partnered with neighborhood watch meetings, clergy councils, park advisory boards, schools and business groups, along with private and city funded gang prevention and intervention groups. These collaborative efforts assisted those in the law enforcement community to better understand the challenges and issues that our community is dealing with. Conversely, the community will better understand law enforcements motivation and procedures.

FBI Director James Comey was asked how he could change the American Justice System, specifically in policing. Comey responded, "It's hard to hate up close. Police in our country have to get out of their cars... and get to know the people they serve, and the people in their communities have to get to know them" (C-SPAN 2015). The literal foot beat of officers in the community is necessary to bridge the ease of communication and connection. Our officers in the LAPD meet with our community in weekly crime prevention flyer distribution details, as well as programs such as "coffee with cops," where we share coffee and positive engagement with our neighbors in a relaxing setting.

Comey further expands on the use of Police Athletic Leagues (PAL) and Citizen Police Academies which have been strong programs connecting us with the youth of our neighborhoods, as well as providing an opportunity for our community to learn about our multi-faceted department and meet the human beings behind the badge. These programs have served us well in the past and is sorely needed in the dark climate we find ourselves in today. "This trust-building process involves frank engagement between law enforcement and the people they serve to address tensions, grievances and misconceptions" (Cobbina). Unfortunately, Comey points out that many departments across the nation have been losing funding and these resources are being eliminated as a result.

This is a vital component of community engagement and building bridges with the diverse community we serve. We fail when we assume that we are transparent as an agency. Without the dialogue and collaborative efforts needed to learn from each other, we will never have the trust and support of the community we strive to protect. Comey continues to explain

that this relationship is “critical to peoples’ trust in the entire justice system. If we neglect it,.. (there) will be a lack of trust and misunderstanding that would be corrosive” (C-SPAN 2015).

It is critical to continue with engagement in these challenging times where race tensions and police shootings are in question. Police departments desire to mirror the face of the community they serve. “Virtually all white officers (92%) but only 29% of their black colleagues say that the country has made the changes needed to assure equal rights for blacks. Not only do the views of white officers differ from those of their black colleagues, but they stand far apart from those of whites overall” (Rich Morin, 2020). This shows that our communities need to continue to work collaboratively to find solutions to a nationwide concern.

“Police officers are only as good as the training their department provides them. They are only as good as the culture their department creates for them. Both emanate from the heart, mind, conscience and humanity of law enforcement leaders and the city, county, state and federal agencies that hire them” (Alexander, 2020). Continued quality training is essential for growth, education, and empathy to those we serve. Justice and police reforms must continue to be discussed as well as the challenges and complexities of police actions must be explained to the general public.

The Police and the community members are the one and the same. We are all human beings with the same desire to ensure the safety and to provide for the well being of our families and loved ones. “In the day to day course of doing our duties we are simply people, set apart by uniform and accoutrements, doing a job to serve the public benefit. We are not ‘us’ and the public is not ‘them.’ We are a community and as part of that community we are entrusted with a special power: the authority to detain, investigate and arrest citizens in the name of keeping the peace and maintaining public safety” (Borelli, 2020).

The time is now to regain the trust and the community must be willing to listen to the daily challenges and violence facing police officers. Our law enforcement partners must invite affective communication and empathy platforms to our neighbors in a collaborative effort to seek long-term solutions.

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