

Ideas in American Policing



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Policing in America: Assessment and Prospects

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Along with external defense, the maintenance of internal order is one of the defining functions of government. The United States, like countries everywhere, has created a particular governmental institution for doing so, namely, the police. In this short essay, I intend to assess what the police institution in the United States has become and where it might be going. I will do so by answering three questions: (1) What is distinctive about American policing? (2) What are the major changes that have occurred in American policing over the last 30 years? (3) What are the factors currently shaping American policing?

The Distinctive Characteristics of American Policing

Compared with other countries, American policing has three distinguishing characteristics.

First, responsiveness to citizen demands. In the United States, anybody can pick up a phone, walk into a police station, or stop a police officer on the street and expect that an officer, armed and uniformed, embodying the full authority of government, will attend to the private problems of that individual. This is a remarkable development in world government. American police

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operations—the work that police do—are determined overwhelmingly by requests from individual citizens. In many other countries, and in almost all countries historically, police were created by governments to safeguard the interests of regimes. Police in the United States today, and in a handful of other stable democratic countries, go to great lengths to respond to what individuals want. It has become fashionable in writing about the police to complain about the demands that the 911 system places on police. However justified the criticism may be from the point of view of workload, the political instincts of American police to remain responsive to individual requests for service are surely correct and should be encouraged.

Second, public accountability. The United States insists on making the police accountable through multiple institutions—

elected politicians, criminal and civil courts, the press, and civilian review of complaints. This is rare in a world where the press is often censored by government, police misdeeds are subject only to the invisible discipline of the police themselves, and politicians rely on the police to keep themselves in power.

Third, openness to evaluation. American police believe that policy must be based on accurate factual information. This is partly a matter of managerial culture, where a “show-me” mentality predominates. Senior officers are uncomfortable merely following tradition; they want programs to be demonstrably cost effective. American policing is also uniquely open to examination by people outside the police. Scholars, management consultants, politicians, and members of the community with a serious interest in policing can get access to almost any activity of any police

force. Only a handful of other countries in the world can make this claim. Indeed, my private test for democraticness is whether a foreign government will give me a visa to study their police. I submit that this is not a trivial test and that the United States passes with flying colors.

Judging the contemporary American police by international as well as historical standards, there is much to be proud of. This is easy to forget, especially among those of us who study the police for a living. Our stock-in-trade, after all, involves pointing out where the police can do better and, hopefully, show them how. But we must never forget that compared with other countries, there is a healthy baby in the police bath water.

Significant Changes in the American Police

The appointment of the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1966) marks the beginning of what is generally considered to have been a period of great change in American policing. What in fact are the accomplishments of the past 30 years, and to what extent have they contributed to the distinctiveness of contemporary American policing? I think there have been seven great changes in American policing during what amounts to my working lifetime.

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(1) The intellectual caliber of the police has risen dramatically. American police today at all ranks are smarter, better informed, and more sophisticated than police in the 1960s.

(2) Senior police managers are more ambitious for their organizations than they used to be. Chiefs and their deputies are no longer content to tend someone else's store; they want to leave their own distinctive stamp on their organizations. To do this, they now recognize that management is an important specialized skill that must be developed.

(3) During the last 30 years, an explicit scientific mindset has taken hold in American policing that involves an appreciation of the importance of evaluation and the timely availability of information.

(4) The standards of police conduct have risen. Despite recent well-publicized incidents of brutality and corruption, I believe that American police today treat the public more fairly, more equitably, and less venally than police did 30 years ago.

(5) Police are remarkably more diverse in terms of race and gender than a generation ago. This amounts to a revolution in American policing, changing both its appearance and, more slowly, its behavior.

(6) The work of the police has become intellectually more demanding, requiring an array of new specialized knowledge about

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technology, forensic analysis, and crime. This has had profound effects on recruitment, notably civilianization, organizational structure, career patterns, and operational coordination.

(7) Civilian review of police discipline, once considered anathema, has gradually become accepted by police. Although the struggle is not yet over, I believe that expansion is inevitable as more and more senior police executives see that civilian review reassures the public and validates their own favorable opinion of the overall quality of police performance. This revolution has already taken place in Australia, Britain, and Canada, and Sam Walker's recent work convinces me that the corner has been turned in the United States (Walker and Bumpus 1991).

This, then, is my list of the most significant changes that have occurred in American policing

over the past 30 years. It may surprise and even astonish many readers that I have not mentioned changes in the strategies of policing, especially the advent of community policing. I have not done so because I am not convinced that strategic changes have been widespread, nor that what is commonly accepted as new is in fact new at all.

I do not mean to suggest that genuine innovation is not going on. Wherever I go, I am enormously impressed with the strategic creativity of American police. Smart people are doing smart things. But what they are doing is so diverse that it is hard to describe. For example, Edward Maguire and his colleagues needed 31 separate categories to capture activities that are associated with community policing (Maguire et al. 1997) Robert Worden and I used 11

programmatic indicators for community policing in our recent survey (forthcoming). When one adds “quality-of-life” enforcement programs as well as problem-specific tactics to the list, strategic inventiveness becomes too complex to capture in the fashionable notions of community- or problem-oriented policing.

Moreover, the most common innovations—DARE, crime-prevention programs, and beat cops—vary enormously in their quality and, even when done well, are arguably not particularly new.

Altogether, then, American police should be congratulated for trying new things, but exactly

what their strategic inventiveness consists of is hard to say. COP and POP have been wonderful philosophic sticks for encouraging the police to reexamine customary strategies, but they are awkward descriptive terms for what has been taking place. Proponents of community policing, among whom I count myself, are somewhat like the beaver in a cartoon I saw some time ago. The beaver is talking to a rabbit at the base of the enormous concrete face of Grand Coulee dam and says, “I wouldn’t want you to think I built this, but it is based on an idea of mine.” The amount of strategic inventiveness in

American policing can be counted as a major change over the past 30 years. What is specifically new substantively is difficult to pinpoint.

American Police and Scholarly Research

One implication of this observation about strategic change in American policing is that research may not have made as significant, or at least as coherent, an impression on policing as scholars like to think. Indeed, the fortunes of police research have been mixed and perplexing. The two studies that challenged the traditional core strategies most directly, namely, the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment (Kelling et al. 1974) and Greenwood-Chaiken-Petersilia’s examination of the criminal investigation process (1976), have had a curious history. The findings of both are accepted as being true, even though their research designs have been sharply criticized, their impact on police practice has been very small, and neither has been replicated. With respect to the efficacy of patrol, the nearest one comes to replication is from “hot spots” analysis (Sherman et al. 1989), and with respect to criminal investigation, the research of John Eck (1982) and the British Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure (1981). Perhaps Kansas City and Greenwood-Chaiken-Petersilia

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have not been replicated because they confirmed the obvious. But if that is the case, then why hasn't their impact on operations been greater?

Two other studies, however, have made a major impact on police policy and both have been replicated—the efficacy of rapid response and police tactics in cases of misdemeanor spousal assault. The irony here is that we now wish the second study (Sherman and Berk 1984) had not had so dramatic an impact on police operations.

Although this review of police research is hardly exhaustive, it seems to me that the connection between policy research and policy is not close. Indeed, it is often paradoxical in that criticism has not led regularly to replication, even when the research was flawed and the implications for policy were very great. Nor has research led to widespread operational changes even when it has been accepted as true.

Factors Shaping American Policing

Unhappily for my scholarly self-esteem, I am beginning to suspect that the future of American policing will not be shaped by research or strategic planning. The role, function, and strategies of police are more likely to reflect the impact of forces that are unseen by either scholars or police practitioners. Based on

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the historical record, I believe that the future of American policing will be shaped most profoundly by four factors.

First, privatization, meaning the loss of market share by the public police in providing defense against crime. There is a growing dualism in policing in all developed nations, with the public police providing security for the poor and private police providing security for the rich (Bayley and Shearing 1996). There is the additional threat that as the affluent classes learn to rely more on private police, they will become less willing to be taxed to provide policing for the poor. Just such a withdrawal of support seems to be happening with respect to public education. Alternatively, the affluent classes might continue to support public policing, but only on the condition that its approach to

crime prevention among the poor emphasizes deterrence rather than the service approach characteristic of community policing.

Second, restructuring of government. A momentous debate is occurring in American politics over the content and appropriate location of governmental action. To what extent should government supplant or regulate market forces, especially in providing social services, and which levels of government should be responsible for administering programs, the so-called “devolution revolution.” This debate has been reflected directly in policing through community- and problem-oriented policing. COP/POP call for changes in both the content and location of policing. Under its philosophy, police functions expand as police develop partnerships with

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is essential, but its impact is different from what many scholars think. Scholars cannot claim credit for major strategic changes, but they can claim credit for reinforcing the unique institutional ethos of the American police, which incorporates fact-based evaluation, openness to observation, and responsiveness to diverse opinions. The influence of scholarship on policing is indirect rather than direct. Its value should not be judged in narrow operational terms. The development of police research during the last 30 years has institutionalized the practice of critical reflection within American policing. In so doing, it has deepened the most distinctive aspects of American policing—its responsiveness and accountability. This is no small accomplishment.

communities, and decisionmaking becomes more decentralized. COP/POP is politically contradictory—more liberal with respect to police functions, more conservative with respect to the location of authority.

Third, group violence stemming from the inequities of race, class, and ethnicity. Every large police force is concerned about the threat of mass violence, especially in large cities. As Kraska and Kappeler have shown (1997), many police forces have already moved quietly to prepare for it. Group violence shapes policing more profoundly than any other single factor (Bayley 1975, 1985). If group violence in the United States becomes persistent or widespread, COP/POP will be dead in the water and the quasi-military character of policing, so often deplored, will intensify.

Fourth, growth in the destructiveness of criminal

violence, especially with regard to terrorism and organized crime. I don't believe that people are becoming more violent and bloodminded than they have always been. But technology has raised the potential destructiveness of criminal actions. Like group violence, this too will encourage a warfare mindset among police, where crime prevention become clandestine and enforcement oriented rather than public and ameliorative.

Conclusion

Having argued that research has had only a small impact on the strategies of policing and that our ability to foresee and plan for the future is probably limited, one might conclude that I believe research on the police is only marginally important. That is not my view. Research on the police

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The Police Foundation is a private, independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting innovation and improvement in policing through its research, technical assistance, and communications programs. Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure, and works to transfer to local agencies the best new information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns. Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.

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