

The BJA Executive Session on

# Police Leadership

2017

*The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, [www.bjaleader.org](http://www.bjaleader.org), to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

## The Role of the Police in Building Community Identity Among Young People <sup>1</sup>

by  
Phillip Lyons

*The police are a highly visible representation of the state, a concrete instantiation of its (often failed) claim to protect and represent all its citizens. The included and excluded may draw important lessons about their status from their encounters with the police.—Bradford, 2014, p. 23.*

Whether one subscribes to the view that the police are law enforcement officers, or that they are peace officers who maintain social order, most agree that an important function of the police is reinforcing community norms and intervening when those norms are violated. Social order depends heavily on voluntary compliance with the law and community norms, which, in turn, depend on community perceptions of the legitimacy of the police as an institution. Furthermore, trust and trustworthiness of government authority, as personified by the police, in the enforcement of citizen-made law provide

<sup>1</sup> © American Psychological Association, [2015].

the foundation and in some measure the expression of citizens' collective efficacy as democratic decision makers.

## **Young People's Attitudes Toward the Police**

Attitudes toward the police are not evenly distributed across all groups. They vary systematically with demographic characteristics. Members of communities with concentrated disadvantage report higher rates of racially-biased policing which, in turn, undermines the sense of legitimacy people experience when they believe they have been treated fairly. Whites have the most favorable attitudes toward the police, with African Americans having the least favorable attitudes and Hispanics falling somewhere between. Age also seems to make a difference, as adults tend to have more favorable attitudes toward the police than adolescents and young people do.

Not only do young people tend to view the police as less legitimate than adults do, they also are more cynical about the law itself. Young people are more likely than adults to assume that law, if not "meant to be broken," is at least apt to be. Young people also are skeptical of the legitimacy of police as an institution. One study of several Philadelphia neighborhoods, for example, found that young people from all racial and ethnic groups and all neighborhoods studied had negative views of the police—lower assessments of police legitimacy and higher legal cynicism—than adults. Although young people viewed the police in some ways as an evil in their communities, they at least viewed them as a necessary one; most thought that police presence would have to increase if crime was to be reduced. Adults don't seem to be nearly as negative in their evaluations of police as young people are. Although attitudes toward the police by minority group members and young people seem bleak, there is cause for hope. The police can change those attitudes.

Decades of research by Tom Tyler, his colleagues, and others have demonstrated that people's beliefs about the legal system are affected by experiences they have with the police. When the police treat people fairly, those people are more likely to comply with the law. Thus, attitudes toward the police are not fixed and unchangeable, but instead are somewhat malleable and may be influenced by police approaches, which entail procedural justice, or fairness. There is even reason to believe that vicarious experiences with the police can influence attitudes toward the police in ways that promote compliance with the law by those who had no direct contact.

## **The Police Role in Building Community Identity Among Young People**

Developmental processes are important to understanding how police can strengthen young people's ties to the community. Much of childhood, youth, and early adulthood involves establishing identities within groups. The level of identification with particular groups can be conceptualized on a continuum from weak to strong. Moreover, the groups themselves may also be plotted on a continuum ranging from no social approval at one end to strong social approval at the other. This latter continuum of social approval of both individuals and groups provides the police with opportunities to influence not only young people's attitudes toward

the police, but also the sense of belonging they have in their communities. The police and their actions are rich with symbolism, which can serve to reinforce the notion of belonging to the community. Or not.

Through their approach, the police communicate much about social acceptance of the various groups to which young people belong as well as acceptance of the individuals themselves. If the police approach and treat young people as if “they” are a threat to “us,” then this will reinforce the notion that they are not us, or worse, that they are against us. On the other hand, if the police treat them as “us,” in ways that remind them that this is who “we” are and how “we” behave, then they can reinforce the social norms in a manner that is more inclusive and builds a sense of community and belonging.

This role for the police may seem alien to some—both in the policing field and the community more broadly, but it shouldn’t. Modern policing in the West was founded nearly 200 years ago on nine principles advanced by Sir Robert Peel. Fully seven of these nine focus squarely on prevention, public support and cooperation, fairness and impartiality, facilitation of voluntary compliance through persuasion and advice, and nurturing positive relationships with the community. Community Oriented Policing was taking hold throughout the United States in the 1990s and represented a return to these historic roots of policing. When the terror attacks of 9/11 occurred, though, the police largely changed course and began to prosecute a war on terrorism. Communities came to be viewed with suspicion because of the possibility they harbored terrorists. The notion of police as urban warriors, soldiers in the wars on crime and terror gained ascendancy.

Currently, the police are undergoing another identity crisis. The ubiquity of video recorders coupled with social media that allow those videos to be transmitted world-wide in an instant have shone a light on police practices that previously had remained in the dark. “Hands up, don’t shoot” and “I can’t breathe” have become rallying cries of communities weary of the experience of the police as an occupying army. Social commentators are forcing us to question the wisdom of the militarization of the police specifically and the role of the police more broadly. Thus, the time may be right for the approaches advocated here. Indeed, many larger police agencies are already returning to those founding principles, and support for the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services in the U.S. Justice Department is on the rise.

## **Conclusion**

How we socialize young people matters. At first blush, the police may seem an unlikely source of that socialization, not only because of their historic role, but also because they are not held in particularly high regard by young people themselves. Fortunately, we can change that. By promoting police interactions with young people that promote a sense of fairness, we can improve the attitudes they have toward police, while simultaneously instilling in them a stronger sense of community.

Socializing young people to understand that they are an important and meaningful part of a larger community is more than a normative warm-and-fuzzy about promoting a sense of belonging. The police-supported socialization process that I envision and that Tyler implicitly advocates would enhance young people’s perceptions of fair treatment in ways that facilitate

greater compliance with social norms, including the law. In short, if young people are treated as if they are part of the community, they are likely to feel and behave like productive participants in community life.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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