

The Diminished Relationship Between Law Enforcement and the Public

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National Command and Staff College, Session #004

June 2019

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to identify, understand, and deter current issues experienced in the public that are affecting law enforcement agencies across the country. In the 21st century, law enforcement agencies are experiencing an increased level of public dissatisfaction and defiance that were not present decades ago when law enforcement officers were well respected by their communities. Social media, technology, and news outlets across the country negatively sensationalize police encounters, and they aim to broadcast content of an encounter that will give them superior ratings, which portrays a negative outlook on law enforcement. Instead of reporting an entire law enforcement encounter, media outlets pick through content of an encounter that they feel people will be drawn to and to bolster their ratings. We will identify changes that have taken place in our country that have caused such a negative outlook toward law enforcement obviously affected by high profile cases such as the Rodney King and Ferguson cases. We will discuss the impact these events have had on retention and recruiting in law enforcement as well, as discuss how to establish a healthy, proactive recruiting and retention campaign. We will identify several leadership concepts that must be implemented by law enforcement agencies to combat this epidemic and to restore a positive law enforcement culture among the public. We will implement a proactive plan to address changes that must be made to assist law enforcement with enhancing aspects within the agency to improve the agencies effectiveness. We will also discuss community outreach, public relations or rebranding of an agency, and how we can address, as well as work past the negative law enforcement culture.

The Diminished Relationship Between Law Enforcement and the Public

In the 21st century, law enforcement agencies are experiencing an increased level of public dissatisfaction and defiance that were not present decades ago when law enforcement officers were well respected by their communities. Social media, technology, and news outlets across the country negatively sensationalize police encounters, and they aim to broadcast content of an encounter that will give them superior ratings, which portrays a negative outlook on law enforcement. Instead of reporting an entire law enforcement encounter, media outlets pick through content of an encounter that they feel people will be drawn to and to bolster their ratings.

Negative Law Enforcement Encounters Witnessed by the Public

Two events have occurred in the United States of America during the past thirty years that have dramatically changed the relationship between Law Enforcement and the public. These are just two incidents in a string of incidents that have changed the public's perception of American Law Enforcement. The Rodney King incident occurred on March 3, 1991, in Los Angeles, California. Rodney King and two of his friends were stopped by the California Highway Patrol and the Los Angeles Police Department after a vehicle pursuit for minor traffic violations. A nearby neighbor, utilizing his personal video recorder, recorded Rodney King's beating by the Los Angeles Police Department. Due to the incident being filmed, broadcasters exploited the video by broadcasting the incident on national television. Thus, the entire world saw numerous Los Angeles Police Officers excessively beat an unarmed black man with their batons. There was no context to the video, only white police officers beating a black man. The aftermath of King's beating was terrible for the nation, as the riots that followed resulted in the death of sixty-three people with over two thousand civilians injured. Also, due to the riots, the city of Los Angeles incurred a total of one billion dollars of property damage. The video was

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

repeatedly broadcasted by national and international broadcasters, which seared the police encounter into the minds of millions of viewers. Millions of Americans, who have never had any negative interaction with law enforcement, were exposed to a blatant, brutal attack on an American citizen. The video of the beating brought police brutality to all of America. This spark ignited a raging fire between Law Enforcement and the public (Sastry & Grigsby Bates, 2017).

An additional event that has had a significant effect on the relationship between Law Enforcement and the public was the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri. Officer Wilson was exonerated for the shooting, but public resentment set off riots in Missouri that caused millions of dollars worth of damage to the city and stoked the embers of the fire. Much of the evidence that exonerated Officer Wilson was withheld for some time. Unfortunately for law enforcement, this information could have possibly helped quell any violence, but the idea of transparency by Law Enforcement agencies had not yet been made popular. On August 9, 2014 the Black Lives Matter movement that was created based upon the Trayvon Martin case, affected the Michael Brown case. The media publicized several public demonstrations across the country, which fueled police dissatisfaction by the public.

The difference between the Michael Brown killing and the Rodney King beating was the invention of social media. These media platforms helped spread information to millions of people around the world, not just America. Unfortunately, there was no video of the incident involving Brown and Officer Wilson, which may have explained why the shooting occurred. This helped cause baseless speculation and theories about what really happened. Many people had their minds made up about the incident before all of the evidence was released. Americans, specifically young Americans, had their perception of law enforcement changed by bloggers and activists who knew no more about the incident than the average American (Diem, 2014).

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

These two incidents stand out among several incidents involving Law Enforcement and the public that have strained the relationship between the two. Many communities in our country have been plagued with law enforcement agencies that have toxic leadership and a culture of mistrust towards the community. The mistrust was double sided; the community felt the same way about their police officers or deputies that served the community. This created the “Us versus Them” mentality between Law Enforcement and the public. This mentality led to the warrior vs. guardian concept for the majority of law enforcement officers. Many law enforcement officers viewed the public as “the enemy” and the relationship between the two became further fractured. The 21st Century Policing Task Force suggests that “Law Enforcement should embrace a guardian – rather than a warrior-mindset to build trust and legitimacy both within agencies and with the public”, as stated by Brocklin (2019). The many cases of police corruption that have plagued law enforcement agencies across the country, have also negatively impacted the relationship between law enforcement and the public (para. 2). There are many negative, unethical activities that law enforcement officers can be involved in such as coercing false confessions, intimidation, false arrest, false imprisonment, falsification of evidence, perjury, witness tampering, brutality, racial profiling, unwarranted search and seizure, and bribery. All of these activities can be considered police misconduct or corruption. Unfortunately, all law enforcement agencies are susceptible to corruption or misconduct, as it occurs across our nation every day.

One of the most notable police corruption cases involved New York Police Department Officer Frank Serpico who revealed a bribery scheme involving many of his peers in the late 60’s and early 70’s. Due to his claims of corruption, the Knapp Commission was formed in April 1970 to investigate the allegations (Burke, 2017). Many of Serpico’s fellow officers were

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

arrested or disciplined for their involvement in the bribery scheme. Love him or hate him, he revealed that there was a huge problem with corruption in the New York Police Department. Police corruption is a popular subject for the mainstream media and for social media these days with the twenty-four hour news cycle. It is very popular for bloggers and reporters to sensationalize or marginalize police officers before all of the facts are out. However, the public's initial perception of these types of incidents are based solely on the information released by the media right after the incidents occur. Transparency and openness by law enforcement agencies can help ease tensions between the public and law enforcement. Giving the public a better understanding of why a police officer or deputy acted a certain way during an incident can help keep unnecessary violence from occurring. It is the responsibility of law enforcement to be proactive in regard to transparency, to engage community leaders with information so they can help their constituents have a better understanding of law enforcement to improve relations and to build a stronger community.

Police Brutality

A 2016 Gallup poll revealed a stark contrast to the stories of brutality and corruption. As quoted by Van Brocklin (2016), "The shocking police story of 2016 you probably didn't hear is that public respect for police surged and is at a near-record high – across every age, race and political persuasion." (para. 8). This means that many positive stories involving law enforcement and the public were not reported to the public. This poll shows that most Law Enforcement agencies across the nation are making concerted efforts to build trust and strengthen relationships with all of the community members that they serve. If we are successful in building these relationships, we can focus on effectively reversing the community's negative perception of law enforcement to foster a positive police culture in the community.

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

To understand the diminished relationship between the community and law enforcement, and how it is affecting our community and our agencies, we must now explore new methods of gaining ownership of our communities by our professional law enforcement officers to serve effectively and ethically. To improve the relationships and image of law enforcement in our country, agencies must take a proactive stance and develop multi-faceted plans comprised of community outreach, public relations and rebranding, buy-in, and ownership by the officers and the community.

The first part of the plan, community outreach, will be comprised of events that will give the community an opportunity to meet their law enforcement officers in a different setting, so they can get to know them as human beings and members of their community. By humanizing law enforcement, the community will see police officers as people and not robots. This is important because if we portray ourselves as robots, we will not be able to mend our relationship with the public. Examples of programs will be “Coffee with a Cop” or “Milkshake with a School Resource Officer”. Agencies can collaborate with a local business to provide a place to meet and have coffee or milkshakes. This will allow us to discuss the problems that the neighborhoods are facing, and how those neighborhoods and law enforcement agencies can work together to solve the issues. An additional program that can be implemented is the Citizens’ Law Enforcement Academy. This program brings the community to a law enforcement agency to enroll in an eight week program where they can learn about every unit in the agency that serves them. They will be able to ask questions and discover programs and services that they were unaware the law enforcement agency provided. The final example of a community outreach program will be Camp Friendship. Law enforcement partners with the school district and selects less fortunate children to spend a week doing learning and doing various activities. The kids will

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

learn community history and the inner workings of positivity in the police culture. We will also include arts and crafts between law enforcement officers and the kids. To develop positive meaningful relationships with the kids of our community, we will also have a graduation ceremony from the one-week summer camp and award them with diplomas and trophies for their participation.

The next step of the plan will be a revamp of the public relations or image rebrand of the agency. By utilizing social media platforms that are free for agencies to use, like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, you are able to show a large number of your community members all of the positive interactions an agency is having with the community they serve. You can also use social media to gain buy-in from your community by having them help you solve crimes, or locate fugitives you are looking for that are hiding in your community. Utilizing Facebook Live, the heads of your agencies can speak directly to their communities and not rely on the local media to possibly edit or deliver the message in a biased manner. You can also use the social media platforms to invite and inform your community of the community outreach programs your agency has to offer to the public. If your agency is going to use social media platforms, and you want community ownership and buy-in, you must keep an open line of communication and respond to questions and comments on your social media platform. This will also allow you to control your message and branding for your agency.

Hiring Newer Generations

As we hire newer generations who want to make a change and have impact in their community, and live in the digital world, having their pictures on social media platforms and sharing their positive interactions with the community, will help in getting them to buy-in to the overall process of improving the image of your agency. They will be able to see the positive

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

reaction from the community by seeing the professional jobs they do every day and the extra services they are providing the community with to build bridges to positive interactions with the communities they serve. We can also ask officers and deputies to send pictures they take during their daily shifts where they have positive interaction with the neighborhoods they patrol. By doing this, you will get them to buy-in to volunteer at the community outreach programs and it will help you with material for your social media platforms.

Changing the image of an agency will not be easy, but with the partnerships in the community, social media use, and acquiring ownership from the younger generation of officers, we will be able to recruit more, do more in our community, and focus on leading our officers authentically, with purpose, to bolster agency retention.

Raising Agency Recruiting and Retention

To succeed in raising our agency recruiting and sustaining employee retention in law enforcement, we have to examine why our agencies are suffering from such a decrease in employee hiring and retention. According to Dudley (2019), “law enforcement recruiting is just as unpopular as it was during the Vietnam war era and civil rights movement as we are in a prominent political divide” (para. 3). Law enforcement is recognized as the most visible form of government. The public measures its political views against law enforcement. Additionally, the media has highlighted the police involved shootings nation-wide, giving the impression of a mass epidemic of law enforcement killing the community that they have sworn to protect. While there are some people that have a strong belief in what media represents in law enforcement, a poll published through *Gallup in 2018* states that they have more confidence over such institutions as religion, banks, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the presidency (Saad, 2018). Finally,

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

financial issues within the communities may take a toll on the generous guaranteed pensions and benefits that an agency was once able to offer to its employees, which can cause a decrease in retention.

Proactive Recruiting and Retention Campaign

In order to establish a healthy, proactive recruiting and retention campaign, you first have to evaluate what you have to offer your prospective employees as well as evaluating your demographics. Recruiters should be looking to represent the demographics of the community that they serve. The population of diverse demographics should also be represented in all levels of rank and units throughout the agency. Next, your agency should select those dedicated law enforcement members that are motivated and believe in the agency by identifying them as the champions of the recruiting team. By giving our champions an important role in the process, they can take ownership of their abilities and effectively motivate those around them to produce positive results in recruiting. Those champions should spend some time with the human resources personnel to become intimately familiar with the agency benefits package that is available to new recruits. As high school students are typically in the process of formulating a career path, the military visits local area high schools to recruit new military personnel. Law enforcement agencies should also visit the schools for agency recruiting. Law enforcement can build relationships with school administrations and teachers to help develop a positive culture of law enforcement. Additionally, law enforcement can utilize the knowledge of the School Resource Officer to help identify potential students that demonstrate a good fit for law enforcement. The agency can host an internship on weekends or offer special credits if allowed through the high school, for participation in programs. According to Cain (2019), “The agency

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

can work with human resources and explore the potential for longer maternity leave allowances as well as other programs that identify with healthy family environments” (para. 12).

Millennials and Generation Z should be targeted in recruiting using current social media technology and trends. The recruiters should identify social media trends and mirror those trends to stay current and on the forefront of recruiting. Additionally, the group identified that it takes more than just a trend to attract a new generation of law enforcement. As these generations want to make a difference, it is important to have established mentors throughout the agency, both male and female, to help guide the growth of new law enforcement as future leaders. The agency should have a defined and current digital footprint that has an easy to locate platform towards recruitment that works on both desktop, tablet, and cellphone technology. This allows the potential applicant to have both immediate and all hour access to the platform. It is best to include most common questions and answers with videos explaining the hiring process and what is expected of them during the hiring phase. The application process should mirror the private industry by having the initial steps to hiring being through digital means.

Finally, it is important to establish meet and greets, or social events, throughout the recruitment process, that will allow for new recruits and families to identify rank and command, as well as identify with mentors. These social events will help to build a sense of belonging to an organization and family, as well as a sense of ownership as the agency identifies that it is actively investing in the growth of each recruit through mentorship.

Increasing Retention in the Agency

To increase retention in the agency, we must provide our employees with all of the tools and education needed to develop into credible leaders in the agency. It is clear from past incidents regarding police use of force that adequate training was not provided to officers that

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

were involved in those incidents. Specifically, the Rodney King case demonstrated how poorly the agency trained their personnel and how toxic the leadership was in the agency Gumbel (2015). We will provide our employees with dynamic training to build their performance and encourage them to work on self-improvement. By teaching them self-awareness, their emotional intelligence will increase, which is vital to operate as a successful law enforcement officer. We will implement recognition and reward programs in the agency to recognize those that are performing at an optimal level and encourage them to lead with purpose. By teaching our employees concepts of leadership and creating personal, meaningful relationships with them, they will gain our trust. By gaining our trust, we can teach our employees to lead peacefully, with justice, service, and equality. By working together as a team, we are holding each other accountable to achieve positive results in the agency. Developing our employees into credible leaders will increase their moral compass and will influence them to progress further in the agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, police in law enforcement have participated in highly publicized, negative encounters with the public that have diminished the relationships between the public and law enforcement agencies across the country. Due to these encounters, law enforcement agencies have implemented new strategies regarding effective training for their personnel to enhance policing in their communities. By taking ownership of the negative perception that the public has regarding law enforcement, we can work on creating positive relationships with them to restore harmony in the community. As we are able to reverse the negative outlook that the public has on the agency, we can focus on providing our employees with dynamic leadership training so that they can make great decisions, even when faced with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and

THE DIMINISHED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

ambiguity. Enhancing, developing, and inspiring all of the employees within our agency will foster a positive culture in the agency so that everyone can lead their communities effectively and with deliberate purpose to protect and serve the community.

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