



Police Reform vs. Policing Reform

Dear colleagues,

Policing in the United States is unique in that it is neither centralized, as is the case in many countries, nor does it fall under the direct control of the Federal Government. Each of the approximately 18,000 local, state, and tribal law enforcement agencies in the nation falls under the control of a local governing body, executive, or elected official(s). Local control is arguably one of the key characteristics that makes the American policing system unique. It is also the characteristic that presents the greatest challenge to establishing standardized ethical and professional practices within a system few deny is in need of reform.

Yet the discussion of police reform seems to focus primarily on individual officer behavior and ignores the operational systems that have an even greater impact on policing outcomes. The great management guru William Edward Deming captured this notion through his 85/15 rule, which says that 85 percent of the problems in any organization are system-related while only 15 percent are worker-related.

Rank-and-file officers do not decide organizational policies and practices. Nor do officers establish hiring standards or have the power to administer discipline. They also do not decide whether an agency embraces crime-reduction strategies that result in racial disparities. Yet when disparities or other systemic problems do occur, rank-and-file officers are quickly demonized and blamed for those outcomes. There is no question that rank-and-file officers must be held accountable for their actions. However, if the systems in which they operate are flawed, even good officers can have bad outcomes.

If we are to achieve real and sustainable reform in law enforcement, our focus must shift from the police (those individuals sworn to uphold the law) to policing systems (the policies, practices, and culture of police organizations). And through reform, our policing systems must identify not just the roles and responsibilities of the police but the roles and responsibilities of the community as well. After all, communities are a vital part of the policing system. In the words of Sir Robert Peel, the founder of modern law enforcement, “The police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.”

To separate the community from the policing system is akin to separating patients from the health care system or students from the education system. Indeed, even the best teacher cannot help a student who refuses to study. Nor can a doctor cure a patient who refuses to take prescribed medication or to follow the doctor’s orders. The same applies to policing. The level of community involvement in the policing system and the level of personal responsibility each community member assumes by cooperating or collaborating with the police greatly impact the outcome of the system.



Focusing on the policing system does not ignore or excuse the misconduct of individual police officers. To the contrary, the stronger the policing system, the more likely bad officers will be identified and removed from service. The stronger the policing system, the more likely the culture of police organizations will reject officer misconduct and embrace accountability and transparency. And the stronger the policing system, the more likely recruitment and hiring practices will focus not only on hiring diverse, qualified candidates who reflect the communities they serve but also on hiring candidates who see themselves as members of that community.

As a veteran police officer with almost 30 years of experience serving communities in Oakland and East Palo Alto, California, I feel optimistic about the future of the American policing system.

The reason I have faith in a positive future for American policing, even amid a growing chasm of distrust between the police and many communities, is that I see firsthand the outstanding work the vast majority of dedicated men and women in law enforcement do every day. I see them take great efforts to identify the best ways to serve their communities. And I see evidence that many communities, even those that feel the most disenfranchised, yearn for a stronger relationship with the police. People in neighborhoods all across the country are working diligently and in collaboration with the police to make sure their communities are treated fairly not only by the law enforcement officials who are sworn to serve and protect them but also by the policing systems in which those officers operate.

We are at a defining moment in American policing history. Our collective efforts to meet the challenges we have faced over the past few years have opened a unique but very small window of opportunity—a window through which both police and the communities they serve see the need for policing reform and recognize the necessity of working together to achieve success.

The [final report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing](#) provides a roadmap for this reform. The task force report outlines 59 recommendations that, when implemented, will result in positive changes in the American policing system and organizational transformation within individual law enforcement agencies.

It is my hope that law enforcement officials across the country not only will read the task force report but will also use its insights, information, and recommendations to reform the policing systems in their own departments.

Let's not waste this unique opportunity on bickering and finger pointing. Instead, let's forge ahead together to reform the American policing system to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Affecting change is never easy, but as President John F. Kennedy said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."

Sincerely,

Ronald L. Davis
Director