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Can We Form a Cohesive Relationship Between the Police and their Communities?

Mia Coomes

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As a college student living away from home for the first time, I have to figure out most things on my own. This includes interacting with many different people and situations including the police. People are aware of the police on a daily basis, whether it be in passing or a more personal encounter. The point being: they're present in your life and therefore, your community as well as many other communities around the world. While the concept of police is global, one fluid and consistent image of them is not. There is a spectrum with the extremes being some parts of the world experiencing the police as an overbearing authority and others experiencing them as almost nonexistent. Also contributing to a negative police image is the culture of distrust that has been woven into our societies by the media through public and personal accounts. Changing relationships with law enforcement must include the adoption of new and altered policing practices in conjunction with widespread social change. This will establish trust where trust has been broken.

Culture of Distrust

Communities need enforcement of laws and a relationship with the groups that provide the service for enforcement. However, there are communities that don't have the greatest relationship with the police, and the media plays a role in that. The community perception of police can be influenced positively and negatively by the media.

Many people have begun to view and interact with the police through a lens of hesitance and fear because of police misconduct. However, the media tends

to more heavily portray the few good deeds officers may make. Dr. Kenneth Dowler is a Canadian professor at Wilfrid Laurier University and has developed and taught several successful and groundbreaking courses on justice and crime. Dr. Valerie Zawilski is a professor at King's University who teaches topics such as social inequality and social justice in post-conflict societies. Their article Public perceptions of police misconduct and discrimination: Examining the impact of media consumption introduces the argument and the variables that largely impact people's perspective of the police. They argue that "Frequent viewers of network news and crime solving shows were more likely to report that police misconduct was a common or frequent occurrence. . . [and] respondents who reported that there were serious crime problems within their neighborhood were more likely to believe that police misconduct was plentiful" (Dowler, Zawilski). From this information, it can be seen that the media and word of mouth has a large impact on how some groups of civilians perceive police and their activity.

Unnecessarily rude and overbearing behavior may have resulted from the disrespect that has been directed towards them by negative portrayals from specific groups and the media. In the media, the negative stories of police brutality and violence are what a greater portion of the public pays attention to more than the positives. A personal account of police brutality was brought into the public eye even more so by journalist Jessica Schladebeck of the Daily News. In her article, "California man claims he was brutally beaten by correctional officers at county jail in 'racist hate crime'", Schladebeck quotes, "'Yesterday three racist county sheriffs from Stockton held me down, beat me, choked me, kicked me and tried to snap my neck, with their fists and batons one by one for a long period of time while I was yelling and yelling for them to stop,' [Jacob Angelo Servin] wrote on Instagram under the username jaykie"(Schladebeck). This account of the incident that took place was explained to be a racial crime in which Jacob Servin was brutally beaten leaving him "barely able to walk or sleep in wake of the incident" (Schladebeck). This is an account in the media in which the police are reasonably narrated as the predators which in turn leaves the authority in a negative light.

Understanding police from a more factual point of view with less bias from the media would be beneficial to my current position, so that I, as a young woman of color, can eliminate some of the fear that I associate with them. After all, they are meant to be our government issued, local line of defense.

The Extremes

In multiple countries around the world, the law enforcement motto is “to serve and protect.” However, some police tend to go to extremes and protect too much or too little. This produces an imbalance of consequence for both the community and those who are in an authoritative position.

For a period of about three decades, overexertion of police authority occurred in the ethnic-Mexican community of Bayou City, Texas where the Houston police department used their authority to racially discriminate against citizens of color in order to protect and maintain white supremacy values. Melanie Lorie Rodriguez addresses this issue in her dissertation: “...lawmen manipulated the police model of due process to abuse their authority and forcibly control the pace of social and institutional change. Houston’s police department worked to reinforce its rank-and-file with Anglos indoctrinated to the white racial values. Police throughout the state manipulated the due process model with the color of law. ” (Rodriguez 94). This quote briefly explains how the police twisted the justice system to work for their own values rather than for the good of the general public, or rather, the minority communities. The authority was used to “stack the deck” in support of white supremacist ideals and belittle and oppress people of color, especially that of the Mexican identifying population. Furthermore, Rodriguez goes on to discuss a subculture that is created which disregards the rights of the citizens even more so: “ ...it also fostered the informal practice of street justice within police subculture [and] [w]ithout a mechanism to control police misconduct, street justice represented the breakdown of law and order throughout the law enforcement system.” The overall system resulted in “the power of police to ignore their rights without direct challenge.”(Rodriguez 94). This exemplifies the exertion of control to the point where instead of feeling safe and protected, people and their rights are being oppressed by the authority that is meant to serve them.

On the other hand, consequence also results from the police having too little control in the community. Javier Duarte has attempted to solve the alarming amounts of corruption that have been embedded in the Veracruz police force as a result of the drug cartels in Mexico. According to David Luhnnow from the *Wallstreet Journal*, “At least a dozen local Veracruz police have been nabbed so far this year for links to drug gangs, particularly the Zetas cartel. Local police are considered so corrupt that many Veracruz residents call them "polizetas,"

a combination of Zetas and police" (Luhnow). With the police being so closely tied to the cartels that are causing unrest for the residents, this exemplifies the lack of authoritative control and protection of the people who are supposed to rely on the police for said protection.

The Balance

According to Aristotelian philosophy, "the golden mean is the desirable middle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency" (Aristotle).

If law enforcement and the people they interact with were to find and act upon the middle ground between the extremes of too much and too little authoritative exertion, a desirable balance would be achieved resulting in a harmonious relationship where each side was respected and communities would thrive knowing they and their rights were being served and protected.

The country of Japan has as close to Aristotle's golden mean model as is currently possible. According to Yamamura, "...although the magnitude of the effect of police presence is larger than that of social capital, the effects of social capital are reinforced by the presence of police through their complementary relationship" (Yamamura). When police and the community collaborate with each other peacefully more is accomplished in terms of coexisting with a result of a reduced crime rate. The Japanese balance is achieved through the contributions of law enforcement working cooperatively and effectively in their communities as is stated by Bayley, Bayley's classic study *Forces of Order* (1991) described the Japanese system of small neighborhood police substations manned by 2-12 policemen who conduct daily foot or bicycle patrols of the neighborhood and interview every household twice a year. Besides providing fast emergency response, they also offer a broad range of small services such as giving directions, taking care of drunks, serving as the local lost and found, and offering sample counseling for domestic disputes. Bayley argued that this low-key approach successfully integrates the police into the community, producing long-term payoff in crime prevention and citizen cooperation with the police (Bayley 963).

As a result of the police being integrated into the community, the citizens respond positively and are therefore more inclined to work cohesively with them. Though flaws may still arise with further investigation and observation, Japan provides a temporary solution and model for many countries and communities around the world.

Rebuttal

While balance may be achievable, doubt is valid because so many people in countries around the world tend to value self over public safety. These people who have a more selfish mindset hinder the progress towards change.

In the United States, for example, many citizens are in possession of a firearm. Worried about themselves and their own safety, having gun laws that would change to be more restrictive on firearms brings unsettlement about their firearms possibly being taken away. With these restrictions being lower on the country's gun laws people are able to purchase, or get a hold of, a firearm easily. Many shootings have occurred in recent years with little reform to the laws. According to Josh Dawsey and Pervaiz Shallwani, a 2015 study found that "...the New York Police Department said it has seen a nearly 9% increase in shootings and a 19.5% boost in murders in the first five months of this year compared with a year ago. Of the 135 murders through May, 98 were the result of shootings"(Dawsey and Shallwani). Public safety was, and is, at stake. If mandated training and stricter regulations were placed on the process of obtaining and owning a firearm, such as is seen in Japan, results may be different. And if law enforcement were to look at and incorporate Japan's model, firearms would not be heavily relied upon when engaging with someone who has defied the law."

If a universal platform of trust is established, communities and law enforcement can work together to achieve a balance where respect is mutual. Police made the first move in contributing to the community in the country of Japan, and in turn the community saw the change, embraced it and made balance possible.

Conclusion

When we as a whole can recognize our faults and begin to respect each other, between the overexertion of police authority and lack thereof as well as influence from the media, we can begin working towards a balance, based off of the dynamics in Japan, and make progress towards communities where fear is reduced and trust is being restored. There are extremities which currently prevent many communities worldwide from reaching a balance, from having too much authority to not providing enough protection. Currently, there is a culture of distrust and in those cultures there are varying levels of confidence in

the authorities. Compound this with the media portrayal of the police, and the trust and comfort is torn away even further. Yet despite different communities around the world having this mistrust in place, Japan is experiencing at least a temporary balance. With the right strategies and community foundation, the ideal balance of trust and respect along with safe and satisfied communities is a real possibility.

This possibility is important to consider because as a college student who lives on a college campus where police presence is very apparent, residents and visitors should feel safe. We live in a time where police have a stigma of being threatening and personal opinions about police presence in communities are more than likely pessimistic. Police presence is an essential piece to communities such as college campuses in upholding safety and maintaining order when they play a positive role in the community.

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