

EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF CRIME, COMMUNITIES, & POLICING

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“The purpose of futures studies is not to know the future but to make better decisions today.”

- Jerome C. Glenn
Introduction to the Futures Research Methodology Series, 1994

In the day-to-day rush of modern society and the high volume of demands placed upon policing resources, strategically thinking about the future is a difficult process to pursue. The many conveniences offered by technology also eat into our free time; we find ourselves consumed with work during too many of our waking hours. Police agencies face the additional challenge of being easily available and serving a “catch-all” function with the communities they serve. As a result, departments and their personnel naturally develop a focus on meeting the demands of today. Understandably, it is challenging for police leaders to find the time and energy to contemplate the future of crime, their community, and their agency.

To be clear, studying the future is not merely a process designed to forecast future events (determining the *probable* future -- those events and forces that seem most likely to emerge). Futures research also seeks to identify events and circumstances that could occur (the *possible* future -- the range of events and forces that might possibly influence the future of policing) and to make choices about events we hope will occur (the *preferable* future -- the opportunities the field of policing has to shape its own destiny).

These latter dimensions are important reasons for studying the future. Individuals and organizations are not relegated to passively await the arrival of a pre-defined future; they have the ability to identify the future they would like to see and to work toward bringing that vision to fruition. We know change is inevitable; rather than being *resisted*, futurists believe change should be *embraced*.

THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLICING

The distinctions between possible, probable, and preferable futures are quite important. Futures research should not be approached with the sole intent of understanding “what is going to happen.” Futures research seeks to answer this important question, but also considers *how we can shape* what is going to happen. This provides a more dynamic view of the future and our ability to shape its direction. The future is not a static, pre-ordained state; there are many possible futures and many ways in which police leaders can act to influence the future of their organization and community. In the spring of 2002, these beliefs lead the Society of Police Futurists International (PFI) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to establish the Futures Working Group (FWG), a collaboration of police leaders, academics, military personnel, and members of private industry. PFI was established in 1991 by graduates of a National Academy law enforcement futures course taught by Supervisory Special Agent Dr. William Tafoya. After Tafoya’s retirement, the National Academy course was rejuvenated by Supervisory Special Agent Dr. Carl Jensen III and is now taught by Dr. John Jarvis. FWG was created to help articulate the possible, probable, and preferable futures associated with crime and policing.

Over the past five years, FWG has analyzed a host of policing topics in an effort to understand the future of crime, communities, and policing. These analyses have been presented at conferences, in executive briefings, and in a number of written products freely available to the public.¹ This article provides a brief overview of *Policing 2020: Exploring the Future of Crime, Communities, and Policing*, a book-length FWG product that brings together a collection of essays examining current and emerging policing concerns, with an eye toward understanding the future. Readers are encouraged to examine the full manuscript for greater depth and detail on topics of interest.² The following sections offer an abbreviated overview of emerging and future issues as they relate to policing in America. *Policing 2020* was not written to describe or define THE future; rather, the objective was to open and expand the dialogue on the future of crime, communities, and policing.

Crime

The prediction of future crime trends has proven to be a perilous enterprise for criminological researchers. In the early 1990s crime forecasts suggested the continued escalation of crime, violence, youth offending, urban conflict, and urban dangers. Such predictions were based on the prevailing trends of recent decades, which showed a clear and steady escalation of violence, particularly among juvenile populations. The reality, as we know, was quite different. The decline of the crack cocaine epidemic, coupled with shifting correctional policies, modified policing efforts, renewed community programs, an economic upswing, and a host of other factors, resulted in a dramatic

¹ Written FWG products can be located online at <http://futuresworkinggroup.cos.ucf.edu/>

² My intent here is to summarize key aspects of *Policing 2020*; errors or omissions are my own and should not be attributed to the authors of chapter contained therein.

decrease in violent crime across the country. The specific reasons for the crime decline are still debated by criminologists, criminal justice practitioners, and policy makers. The lesson for futures-thinkers, however, is to be cautious in predicting future patterns based on past trends. In reality, predicting future offending patterns is a difficult process because we still have a relatively weak grasp on the complex web of factors that influence criminality.³

Though future levels of offending might be difficult to predict with accuracy, it is possible to be more confident in predicting the nature of future crime problems, as well as the (in)ability of the police to meet such future problems. There is a clear trend toward criminal offending that targets and/or utilizes computers and digital communications technologies (though “good old fashioned” street crime is alive and well). Existing technologies have resulted in the emergence of heretofore-rare offenses (identity theft), while creating “new bottles” for some “old wine” (e.g., online predation of youth, fraud via various iterations of the “Nigerian widow” scheme, the distribution of illicit images, and the distribution of materials protected by copy write, to name a few). Conventional crimes have become more complex (e.g., using encrypted computer systems to manage the books for organized crime enterprises).

Technology will only continue to facilitate the emergence of new and different methods for committing new crimes, as well as many standard old offenses (i.e., how will we regulate the fabrication of illicit substances when nanotechnology arrives in our households as a direct-to-consumer technology?). Technology will also result in new questions about the nature of crime; as virtual reality systems improve, will it be illegal to

³ See Burruss, G. (2007). Crime in 2020. In J. Schafer (Ed.) *Policing 2020: Exploring the future of crime, communities, and policing*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

view or even engage in sex crimes in this new environment? At the same time, technology opens new avenues to the police as they seek to respond to crime in a more efficacious manner. The proliferation of forensic technologies is a key example of the improved ability to identify or exclude suspects from further investigative consideration. Pervasive digital monitoring systems (many not specifically designed to support the investigation of crimes) have enabled the police to better determine “who dun it”, though their application remains the exception. Will the technologies of tomorrow allow us to retrospectively identify the offenders of today, as we have witnessed with DNA profiling?

*Communities*⁴

The communities police serve have typically been in states of flux, a trend that will clearly continue into 2020. Medical and health care technologies seem certain to increase the average age of our population. Latinos are supplanting African Americans as the dominant minority group, both nationally and within many urban areas. How will immigrant and migrant populations change the composition and culture of American communities? Will our communities move beyond the strife and conflict that has typically accompanied rapid demographic transformations? What role will police play in these processes? Will migrant groups seek to assimilate or maintain their identity? What political ramifications emerge?

Technology and the economy are changing the nature of work for Americans and those employed within our nation’s borders. Though many remain unaffected, changes in

⁴ See Jensen, C.J., & Levin, B.H. (2007). The world of 2020. In J. Schafer (Ed.) *Policing 2020: Exploring the future of crime, communities, and policing*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

where, how, and what we do for a living will continue to expand. How will global political and economic issues react to the probable continuation in outsourcing of American production- and service-sector jobs to other nations? How will the American workforce respond? Will national identity retain its significance as more of our life and culture shift into a virtual world with fewer borders, blurred boundaries, and personal identity based on unconventional foci (i.e., based on interests, lifestyle, or perhaps nations that exist only in virtual realms)?

*Policing*⁵

There are many valid questions regarding the ability of police organizations to adapt and respond to future needs and demands. This matter is complicated by the current challenges agencies encounter as they seek to staff basic patrol operations due to declining budgets and dwindling interest in policing employment. Will interest in policing careers continue to wane? Will police organizations be able to retool their internal operations to make careers more attractive? Will organizations be able to attract personnel with the skills sets needed to respond to greater technological demands? Will emergent youth cultures embrace police work as a noble and valid professional endeavor? Can agencies attract employees from their changing constituent basis to offer a more representative agency?

⁵ See generally:

Jensen, C.J., & Levin, B.H. (Eds.). (2005). *Neighborhood-Driven Policing*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Levin, B.H. (2007). Human capital development. In J. Schafer (Ed.) *Policing 2020: Exploring the future of crime, communities, and policing*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Myers, R. (2007). From pyramids to networks. In J. Schafer (Ed.) *Policing 2020: Exploring the future of crime, communities, and policing*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Myers, R., & Cowper, T. (2007). Net centric crisis response. In J. Schafer & B. Levin (Eds.) *Mass casualty events*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Beyond human resource considerations, many valid concerns emerge related to the nature of police organizations and operations. Is a structure built on industrial era operations and assumptions still viable in the digital world? If not, what are the alternatives? Will police agencies have the courage to seek out and implement new organizational structures? Will those alternatives produce more efficacious outcomes? What role would technology play in facilitating a police agency that is “net centric” as opposed to hierarchical? Does the public want the police to operate in a more dynamic and fluid manner, where “checks” on governmental power are perhaps less apparent?

In considering future crime trends, a central question that must be asked is whether prevailing policing systems are adequate. Are policing structures invented in the industrial era sufficient in a digital world? Are systems sufficiently lithe, nimble, and adaptive to respond to emergent problems in dynamic environments? Can police forces built upon the notion of finite geographic boundaries operate successfully in a virtual world? Questions abound. The prevailing evidence would tend to give more pause than confidence in current modes and methods of policing.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The objective of *Policing 2020* was to make an initial effort at expanding the dialogue about policing futures. Readers will have to judge the extent to which that objective was achieved. Some issues and trends discussed in this article are clearly visible on the horizon; these matters already consume our attention and will continue to be the subject of debate and action. Other ideas challenge you to rethink very basic assumptions about police organizations and the policing enterprise; they seek to push you

from your normal ways of visioning policing and demand that you question the validity of traditional assumptions. Readers may not be persuaded by all of these arguments, but these ideas are still of value if they expand the dialogue regarding policing American communities. Perhaps the greatest benefit of undertaking futures studies is that it pushes us to see the world and our possible future in novel, innovative, creative, and visionary ways.

Policing has been widely criticized as being too reactive, failing to be self-reflexive, and assuming that the *status quo* is ideal; there is a strong tendency to look at our failures and short-comings as virtues and necessities.⁶ One of the greatest benefits of futures thinking is not the outcome, but the benefits of the process. The act of undertaking a consideration of the future pushes us to think differently, critically, and analytically; it pushes us to question assumptions, expand horizons, and contemplate alternatives. In the context of policing, futures analysis encourages you to overcome the analytical and cognitive short-comings that have typified too much of the profession.⁷ Certainly advances have been realized in recent decades. Police organizations and the leaders of today are far more open to examining the outcomes of prevailing practice. Nonetheless, more improvements are needed. Policing has achieved a tentative willingness to consider policing *today*; what remains to emerge is embracing the practice of working to understand and shape policing *tomorrow*. The potential exists to make policing more efficient, effective, and equitable; however, doing so will involve taking

⁶ Credit for this idea goes to a quote attributed to J.W. Gardner's and published in a 1968 anthology of his speeches and writings edited by Helen Rowan (*No Easy Victories*, New York, Harper & Row).

⁷ Thomas Cowper provided a lucid argument along these lines during a discussion in the winter of 2005. While the words are largely mine, he deserves full credit for making this important point.

some risks, asking some difficult questions, challenging some deeply entrenched ideas, and rethinking the policing enterprise.

In considering the future of policing, your focus should be three-fold. First, seek to understand the trends and forces that could influence police officers, organizations, administration, and the communities you serve. Second, attempt to determine which of these trends and forces are more likely to occur. Doing this allows you to develop well-planned, proactive responses, rather than waiting for the future to arrive and rushing to react to foreseeable circumstances and situations. Third, identify the future you would like to bring to fruition. This is the pinnacle of futures studies as it allows you to exercise control over your destiny. You certainly can err or fail in your efforts to realize a preferred future. Such failure, however, can be considered akin to the cliché that it is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all. It may be better to strive for a future that did not arrive, than to simply view the future of policing as a force outside of your control.