

Public Perception

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The convergence of the military and police has numerous associated benefits, as detailed elsewhere in this monograph. Anyone familiar with the goals, missions, and struggles of a modern police force can readily recognize the potential impact that military cooperation with the police in the arenas of information sharing, technology and equipment applications, and personnel training may have on police efficacy, efficiency, and safety. Before these benefits can be realized, however, important factors must be taken into consideration. One such factor includes the legal aspects of military and police convergence and cooperation, which has already been discussed. Another caveat, which could be easily overlooked by officials, is that of public perceptions of military influence on domestic policing.

Currently, many citizens have tarnished views and opinions of the police and the military and police nexus. The beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Officers in 1991 is still popular in discussion of police brutality, and the shooting and killing of Sean Bell by the New York Police in 2006 is a fresh example of possible misuse of deadly force by the police. On the other end of the spectrum, many people may still find a cognitive association between the military and police nexus and the Kent State incident on May 4, 1970 in which four students were killed and nine wounded by the Ohio National Guard. Though this occurred over 30 years ago, the incident has attained historical significance, as evidenced by annual commemorative rallies held by Kent

State students on the anniversary of the incident. Within the past decade, the public eye has fixated on issues such as police corruption with the LAPD Rampart Scandal and challenges of ineptitude in intelligence, information sharing, and investigation, which result in tragedies such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

These types of incidents are relatively rare considering the amount of work conducted by law enforcement officials in the United States every day that is in no way related to scandal or a misuse of authority. However, they are high profile, highly publicized, and play a part in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of the general populace toward the police and, by association, the government itself. Within recent years, these perceptions seem to have led to an attitude of mistrust toward law enforcement and the government for some, especially after the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act. Some criticisms rest on aspects of delayed information sharing and release to the public (i.e., Stern, 2004). Others argue that the civil liberties, constitutional rights, and freedoms of American citizens are being challenged, including the right to question or criticize the government, which is becoming increasingly secret and adopting a policy of deflection and dismissal instead of previous policies of informing and discussing (i.e., Martorella, 2006; Wheeler, 2005).

Harsher viewpoints have been expressed as well, such as the Patriot Act enabling “a system of surveillance and control that may be beyond the bounds of national security concerns” (Martorella, 2006:131) and that, due to legislative changes and policies of law enforcement and the government, the United States is approaching the Orwellian dystopia from the novel *1984* (Strossen, 2004). At a more local level and relating more clearly

to the military-police nexus, Reiman (2001) has argued that police are becoming increasingly hyper-militaristic, fostering more of an “us versus them” mentality among police towards citizens. Wozniak (2005) furthers this argument, suggesting that the convergence between the military and the police is a vehicle to suppress dissent and enforce political ideology through force. He also argues that paramilitary units, such as SWAT and tactical operations teams, foster situations in which violent outcomes are likely. For example, proactive policing, such as serving outstanding arrest warrants on violent offenders, is meant to create an environment where violence is provoked and paramilitary police units are able to justify violent means.

It is beyond the scope of this work to engage in debates as to how much credibility these claims and accusations have. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that these perceptions exist, and without any attention to these viewpoints, it is possible they will become more intense and widespread as the link between the military and domestic policing becomes stronger. If that does indeed occur and government or police officials are not forthcoming with information that could prove contrary to the seemingly obvious or are not proactive enough in reaching out to the general public, then the citizen trust placed in our law enforcement organizations may be undermined. Furthermore, as public perception shapes not only public trust but also public behavior, perceptions leading to strong mistrust may result in officials being voted out of office or, in worst case scenarios, significant social unrest (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). This is especially true in an era consisting of numerous political interest groups, many of whom are critical of law enforcement

and related policy implementation concerning areas of funding and adequate training (Haider-Markel, 2004).

Compounded by a lack of citizen contact and information sharing initiated by the police, other mechanisms may serve to reduce levels of public trust. Relating back to the expressed concern over government spying and secrecy, Los (2002) associates these two factors with authoritarian police states where the police lack benevolence and concern for the public and citizens come to distrust government and law enforcement. Furthermore, incidents of police misuse of force, which are often highly publicized, may be interpreted as actions of social discipline, especially if misuse occurs within certain structural locations, such as minority or immigrant areas (Choongh, 1997; Goldsmith, 2005). Members of the same group of victimized individuals may perceive themselves in conflict with the police (Cunneen, 2001), especially if their misuse of force has the appearance of being sanctioned. Once again, the Rodney King incident and related riots come to mind. In addition to potentially violent reactions to these situations, long-term issues may arise as members of the public view the police as targeting and discriminating against particular groups. When misuse of force begins to be perceived as police brutality against certain sections of the public, it becomes associated not only with poor appreciation for principles of human rights but it further distances police from the community, which makes volunteered information from citizens to the police problematic (Goldsmith, 2005).

In relation to withholding information from the public being regarded as operations of secrecy, it can also undermine trust in police by fostering misperceptions. For example, failures in explaining police responses to calls for service from citizens or citizen complaints

of a particular problem may make it appear as though the police are neglecting or are indifferent to the concerns of the public. Additionally, failure to respond to these reported matters may lead to misperceptions, which result in the public viewing the police as inept or incompetent (Goldsmith, 2005).

Public trust in the police is often regarded as an essential, albeit delicate, component of law enforcement. More recent trends of community-oriented policing has increased contact between agents of law enforcement and the public, which may serve to mitigate the aforementioned “us versus them” mentality that some officers may develop, a mentality inherently detrimental to reciprocal trust and cooperation between police and citizens. Increased trust in the police can also increase the public’s view of law enforcement as a legitimate organization, which has the effect of increasing public cooperation in ways that assist in increasing police efficacy (Goldsmith, 2005). While much can be gained through a convergence between the police and the military, it is important to note that these aspects of trust and mutual respect are beneficial to both the public and the police. Becoming too paramilitaristic, however, may actually harm the image of policing in the minds of the general public, as well as distance the police from the citizens they are supposed to serve and protect (Murray, 2005), resulting in decreased efficiency, efficacy, and popular support.

Fortunately, many agencies have mechanisms in place that can help foster communication between the police and the public. Agencies that have adopted community policing styles have officers who communicate and cooperate with the public. Not only does public opinion improve when citizens believe that

community policing is being practiced in their neighborhoods and cities (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005), but satisfied citizens are also thought to have become the “eyes and ears” of the police (Cordner, 1995). However, it has been found that involvement in community policing is rarely presented in news coverage (Chermak & Weiss, 2006). Many departments already have public information officers (PIOs), who have a duty to maintain police-media relations in order to manage their department’s public image. Unfortunately, though, only about 40% of media personnel believe that the police do a good job of keeping them informed about community policing, even though 80% of media personnel report that citizens are interested in news about local law enforcement agencies (Chermak & Weiss, 2006). Having PIOs increase communication with media personnel and increasing the amount of effort spent on managing police image may not only build relationships between the police and the media but also keep the public informed of news, developments, and successes in matters regarding local law enforcement. This could be achieved through such means as holding press conferences or community meetings, simply running a weekly newspaper column with the purpose of having the police keep the public informed, or provide a neutral ground for the public to have question and answer sessions with police representatives. Periodic news about proactive police activity and successful operations in law enforcement also foster the image that police are effective and efficient investigators of crime (Christensen, Schmidt, & Henderson, 1982).

In addition to lone PIOs, third parties can be brought in to provide input to the police and some amount of community oversight. Some agencies have already

incorporated Community Relations Units, which create working relationships between the police, other city agencies, city government officials, and the community as a whole (Lemmie, 2003). This can provide a mechanism for citizens to express their views to the police, and it also establishes a network of contacts for the quick processing and dissemination of information pertaining to incidents that are high profile and may gather a lot of attention. Additionally, citizen review boards can be developed to provide outside oversight and investigation into allegations of serious police misconduct or misuse of authority, such as major uses of force and deaths that occur while a suspect is in custody (Goldsmith, 2005; Lemmie, 2003).