

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Police Legitimacy and Public Perception**



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## **ABSTRACT**

Today, as in past decades, law enforcement agencies across the nation have faced a common problem, legitimacy and public perception. This is relevant because the perception the public holds of a police department's legitimacy is the reality that the department must work under. In most cases, this perception has been built over generations of both positive and negative events involving law enforcement.

Police departments should invest in building a strong relationship with the citizens they serve. Due to generations of perceptions, this is an endeavor that cannot be accomplished overnight or without involving a great level of commitment from the agencies and employees alike. The outcome will be determined by the formal and informal contacts that are made by employees with citizens on a daily basis. These contacts should always leave the public with perceptions of trust, trust that they are being treated fairly, without bias, and with their best interests in mind.

Building trust is no small task and will only be successful if agencies stop relying solely on programs to build these relationships. These programs are important, but more important is the belief that programs do not build relationships, people build relationships. When law enforcement agencies and employees believe this at their core and truly desire to commit to building positive perceptions and earning the public's trust, they will then truly earn the legitimacy they desire.

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## INTRODUCTION

Police departments across the country face the same problems today that they have faced for years, legitimacy and public perception. Throughout American history, law enforcement officers and agencies have been portrayed in the media and by word of mouth in both a positive and negative manner. One thing is for certain, the reputations gained as a profession were earned. Ranging from the negative events surrounding the Los Angeles police departments scandals involving Rodney King and the Rampart incident, to the positive response provided to all law enforcement following the horrific attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Boston Marathon, to the multitude of incidents nationwide in between, perceptions have been formed. These perceptions have affected all law enforcement officers and agencies across the nation.

Most recently, police officers across the nation have been affected by the events in Ferguson, Missouri. According to ABC News ("Police officer," n.d.), "Tensions between police and residents in Ferguson boiled over after Officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown, 18, six times in broad daylight on August 9" (para. 3). Regardless of the facts involved in the case, perceptions have been formed. Each one of the above mentioned events influences the public's perception of all police officers. The U.S. Department of Justice (2007) stated that "Building and maintaining community trust is the cornerstone of successful policing and ... takes a great deal of continuous effort. Unfortunately, the ethical work of thousands of law enforcement officers is easily undone by the actions of one unethical officer" (p. 3). These perceptions affect the legitimacy of agencies and officers across the country. Perception has been defined as

the way one thinks about or understands someone or something and legitimacy as being allowed according to the rules or laws; real, accepted, or official: fair or reasonable.

The perception the public holds of a police department's legitimacy is the reality that department must work under. In most cases, the public's perception has been built over generations. Gallagher, Maguire, Mastrofski, and Reisig (2001) stated in their final report to the International Association of Chiefs of Police that research on the factors influencing the public image of the police typically draws on the "usual suspects": age, race, sex, income and socio-economic status, victimization history ... and other individual level factors thought to influence attitudes more generally" (p. 24). Police departments and officers cannot control nor have an effect on all of these factors.

This paper will show that police departments should invest in building a strong relationship with the citizens they serve. In this situation, it is the members of the agency who will build those relationships. The officers in a department are the key factor to solving the legitimacy equation and winning the battle for how an agency is perceived by its citizens. Due to the enormous amounts of factors that affect the public's perception of police departments, this paper will focus on the factors it can control, at least to some degree.

For the purpose of this research, two types of contacts will be considered, formal contacts and informal contacts. Maxson, Hennigan, and Sloane (2003) described that there are "two kinds of contact with officers: formal and informal" (p. 3). Formal contacts are the most recognizable contacts to the public. These are the contacts made while police carry out their duties and occur almost always at a negative

time or event. Examples of formal contacts are on traffic stops, making arrests, investigation of crimes, interviewing victims, disturbances, and other similar encounters. Informal contacts are the contacts that police employees have some control over and should strive to make daily. The U. S. Department of Justice (2007) explained that “these informal contacts included conversations with police officers on patrol and interactions with police at community meetings, police sponsored youth activities, and community safety fairs” (p. 3).

## **POSITION**

As mentioned above, the officer is the key factor involved when it comes to influencing what perception the community has of its department and the legitimacy the community will give that agency. Citizens in every community desire to be treated fairly, with respect, and without bias. Harvey (2011) quoted Tyler when he stated “These normative aspects of experience include neutrality, lack of bias, honesty, efforts to be fair, politeness, and respect for citizens’ rights (p. 11). These citizens also want to believe that the police agency and officers have their best interest in mind.

Police officers are the faces of the department in most cases and have the most opportunity to communicate with citizens. This communication or contact, whether formal or informal, is imperative to building the relationships needed to be perceived as legitimate by the community served. It is the relationships police officers and agencies build that will directly correlate into the legitimacy the community will give to the agency and officers. Fischer (2014) stated “Second, legitimacy reflects the willingness of residents to defer to the law and to police authority, i.e. their sense of obligation and responsibility to accept police authority” (p. 9).

Looking at the following example can help readers understand. Every police officer has at one time or another been approached by the over enthusiastic individual, usually on a meal break, who wants to ask a variety of questions for a friend who was stopped for a traffic violation in another city or some other seemingly minor issue. This is the individual who will ask question after question for what can seem like an eternity. The officer has a choice to make in this encounter. The officer can answer the questions abruptly and in a manner that ensures the signal is sent to that individual that the officer truly does not care. Or the officer can answer the question in a manner that ensures the citizen leaves with the feeling that their questions were well received and that the officer truly cares about their situation. As simple as this seems, taking a few minutes to truly communicate in a meaningful way and ensure that the correct message is sent could be the difference in how the agency is perceived not only by that individual, but also by that individual's family and friends.

As discussed, the need for agencies to build positive relationships are paramount for the community to truly provide an agency with the legitimacy needed to function effectively. During an interview conducted by Stewart (2014), Robert Wasserman stated, "The community will not view the police as legitimate, particularly in minority and ethnic minority communities, unless the agency has developed a relationship of trust with them showing that the police care about the communities quality of life" (p. 1).

This leads to the second point, which is trust. In every relationship, trust is the number one factor for long term success of that relationship. One article stated, "Trust is the first and perhaps most important predictor of long-term relational success" (Ni, 2013, para. 2) If police agencies are going to obtain legitimacy in their communities,

then trust between the members of that agency and the members of the community must exist. Trust can be improved in a variety of ways including the formal and informal contacts discussed previously. It should be the focus of every employee to deliver services in a manner that will enhance the communities trust.

Whether it is the patrol officer on the street stopping and taking a few minutes to play catch with children in his assigned beat, conducting a traffic stop, or making an arrest, the communication and tactics used will have an effect on the trust the public has on the agency. It could also be the dispatcher or another employee answering the phone or fielding a complaint that decides what level of trust the community will have in the agency that serves them. In every situation, the words and actions chosen by these employees have the potential to either build the community's trust in the agency or to destroy the community's trust in the agency. In a report by the Police Executive Research Forum (2014) it states, "Legitimacy and procedural justice are measurements of the extent to which members of the public trust and have confidence in the police, and are willing to defer to the law and to police authority" (p. 1). Trust is the foundation that will determine the longevity and prosperity of the relationship agencies and communities build.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

There are certainly a number of potential counters that could be made. This research will explore a few that could potentially exist with employees and agencies. For decades now, police agencies across the nation have spent an exponential amount of resources, time, and money on community policing programs. Agencies have purchased literature, trained officers, implemented programs, and even created entire

divisions to operate in the community policing arena. The Police Foundation (“Community Policing,” n.d.) stated, “The movement toward community policing has escalated dramatically in recent years, due in large part to the Federal government’s commitment of billions of dollars to hire and train 100,000 community policing officers” (p. 1).

As a result of the commitments and expenditures to these programs, it is not out of the question that individual employees and even agencies would argue the fact that “programs are in place for that.” In some situations, it is that philosophy alone that has created distrust from the community toward the agency that serves them. Although agencies do have personnel assigned to organize and participate in community policing activities, these individuals do not have the ability, day in and day out, to contact the number of citizens it takes to truly change perceptions. The bottom line is that programs and divisions do not build relationships, people build relationships. An article supported this fact when it stated, “You need to build relationships with people one-to-one if you want them to become involved in your group or organization” (“Building and Sustaining,” n.d., para. 12)

Many officers, employees, and agencies may look at the amount of time and effort it takes to truly build relationships in and with the community and argue that there is simply not enough time. Many agencies are working below staffing levels and are inundated with calls for service. This alone brings some credibility to their argument. When agencies are understaffed, multiple issues arise. Sometimes customer service levels drop due to the heavy call load officers and employees are dealing with. Common sense identifies that when the same job is being done with fewer people, each

individual's work load increases. The Greeley Colorado assessment cited that most of the employees believed that they were a reactive department and not proactive because they had too many calls for service and not enough officers to spend time on more proactive tasks ("City of Greeley," 2008). Although there is some credibility to the issue, the objective is not to spend more resources. The objective is to increase trust with citizens during the contacts officers and employees make. As stated earlier in this research, it is the officer on the street who will gain the trust of the citizens served.

For example, a victim of sexual assault contacts a police agency asking for help; the victim makes contact with the dispatcher and the first impression is formed of the department. The officer then arrives on scene and yet another perception is gained as the investigation unfolds and the responding officer completes the preliminary investigation, every individual, from the victim and their family members to the employees at the hospital, form perceptions of not only the officer but also the agency.

Payne and Thompson (2008) supported this when they stated, "Among those involved in this response are sexual assault crisis workers (as well as health care professionals, victim-witness advocates, counselors, mental health workers, and so on)" (p. 24). After looking at this single example, it is easy to see how many citizens one officer can make an impression on during the course of a single day.

A second issue that can arise when staffing levels are not being met is agencies reducing the number of individuals assigned to community policing programs and events or even removing the programs and events themselves. A U.S. Department of Justice (2011) article clarifies these facts in an article when it stated, "The nation's law enforcement agencies are confronting severe budget cuts and unmanageable layoffs,

and they are fundamentally changing how they keep the public safe” (para. 1). The realistic belief here is that these officers’ time and efforts are needed more in other areas such as patrol or investigations. This argument is credible regarding the need to staff these “critical” personnel. Improper staffing levels can create unsafe working conditions for officers and poor customer service. Nester-Harper (n.d.) stated, “Both product and service quality suffer when fewer employees are available to serve customers and run production lines” (p. 1). The argument arises that these programs and personnel can only work in these programs when staffing levels and budgets are at more manageable levels. Realizing that individuals build relationships and not programs, this argument could be conceived as credible.

What is being overlooked by these agencies is the fact that these programs do have a place in the process. The programs and events these officers and divisions coordinate and plan are crucial to drawing citizens into an environment where they can interact with the police on a much more personal basis. Morris (2000) detailed, “More than 32 million people in 9,530 communities gathered in parks and streets and front yards, celebrating yearlong partnerships between police and communities that have helped reduce crime” (p. 4). This is not to say that the program is more important than the individual when it comes to relationship building. It is, however, an avenue to increase the positive contacts an agency seeks to build between employees and the community.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Over previous decades, police departments, combined, have spent millions of dollars from their individual budgets as well as state and federal budgets to implement

community policing programs and place more officers on the street. Although these have been a giant step in the right direction, the outcomes agencies seek will not be met until the individual employees of these agencies truly invest themselves into the equation. Earlier statements reflect the need for police departments to invest in building strong relationships within the community they serve. This will only occur when the individual relationships the employees build turn into trust within the community. After all, it is communication through contacts, both formal and informal, that will ultimately determine the level of trust and legitimacy the community will give to the agencies that serve them.

Because relationships are based on trust, it is imperative that the employees of an agency strive to meet the expectations the community will place on them. Each contact made leads to a perception, good or bad, depending on the employee. It is understood that officers and employees cannot please everyone and that there will be unhappy customers; sometimes all an officer can do is the right thing. The idea is for agencies, through the employees, to change perceptions, earn trust, build relationships, and gain legitimacy within the community served.

In any change, there are entities that will try to find a reason why not to do it. In the research conducted here, it was found that, as stated earlier, millions of dollars have been spent on community policing programs across the nation. This fact alone has created in some agencies an attitude of why should the individual have to do that when programs are in place that deals with community policing issues. Facts are facts, there are programs in place, but programs do not build relationships, people build relationships. Police agencies can no longer hide behind programs, regardless of how

much has been spent. Officers and employees must invest themselves into the equation and agencies must believe and invest in its very core the necessity to change public perception and gain legitimacy in the process.

It is understood that police departments are, in most cases, understaffed and that this creates a heavier workload for every employee. It is also understood that as a result, many agencies have restructured and placed officers back on the street or in investigative positions. This shortage should not change the goal of the agency or the officer. Take for example the scenario previously regarding the sexual assault victim. In that scenario, one officer and one dispatcher were provided with an opportunity to communicate with a large group of very diverse individuals throughout the investigation. From the victim, family, and friends of the victim, and the numerous other professionals involved, these employees were able to leave each individual with a perception. It is the day to day contacts that are made that will form the perceptions agencies have.

When budgets are reduced and programs are reduced or removed, it is these non-essential programs and employees who generally are affected. This is done for very good reasons, generally to provide manpower in patrol and other essential positions within the department. Although agencies now know that individuals are at the core of the effort to build relationships, agencies cannot forget that these programs are very important as well. These community policing programs are a key to coordinating and creating events that draw citizens in, providing agencies with the chance to meet and befriend them. In many cases, these are the first occasions a citizen has had to speak with an officer, especially in an unofficial setting. These contacts help citizens realize that police officers and employees are people to.

Finally, it is recommended that every agency should hire, train, and retain employees who “buy in” to this philosophy. The future of policing has changed and the expectations of citizens across the country have heightened. This is a simple philosophy to implement. It is very cost effective and will only require training from within the agency to clearly state the expectations of all employees, the potential problems and solutions, and the desired outcomes. Prior to implementing the initiative, surveys should be sent out and interviews conducted in an attempt to establish a current level of trust and overall perception of the agency and its employees. Goals should then be set to address areas needing improvement and desired outcomes.

Once the initiative has been put into operation, employees should be held accountable for meeting the expectations that have been set. Contacts should be reviewed and feedback should be constant from both inside and outside of the agency. Leaders should invest time into getting out into the community, not just with the business owners, and they should get a true feel for the pulse of the community and provide the community with the opportunity to speak freely with them. Not only will this motivate the community, it will motivate the employees to see that their leaders are truly investing themselves into changing the public’s perception and gaining legitimacy. Times are changing in the world of law enforcement and the profession has never been held to a higher standard than it is today. Proactive agencies will embrace this challenge and create legitimacy through public perception and trust.

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