

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Changing Law Enforcement Organizational Structure by Reducing
Barriers of Command and Information**

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ABSTRACT

Police departments tend to operate within an archaic and overly redundant system of organizational structure that inhibits their ability to perform the expectations of the communities they serve. This is further compounded as these systems of organization prevent command staff from making the best use of their line officers. Tenets of community policing, and newer generations of officers, require that departments transition from compartmentalization of specialized tasks towards geographic based command and increased latitude for front line officers.

The duties and powers given to a police officer by the state are vast. In classic models, agencies curtail duties by creating silos of responsibility to make them more manageable. A problem that was created from this process was the assignment of officers away from patrol and community problems. Often, patrol divisions are staffed at levels necessary to handle emergencies, but not sufficient enough to give officers time to form beneficial relationships and knowledge of the area they are responsible for. By compartmentalizing assignments or areas of responsibility, departments unintentionally encourage negative attitudes and a lack of empathy towards the problems others in separate divisions are experiencing. Lastly, these types of models may have been well-suited to the Baby Boomer and Generation X populations but are incompatible and frustrating with the Generation Y officers who are entering the profession of law enforcement. By moving towards geographic based command and responsibilities, eliminating unnecessary divisions, reinforcing patrol division staffing, and increasing the latitude given to front line officers, agencies can increase their ability to retain quality personnel and effectively combat the problems specific to the communities they serve.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, law enforcement agencies have operated in an organizational model taken from the United States Military in terms of rank and command. Almost every police agency has an executive level of command, or policy makers. At the next level, there are commanding officers responsible for entire divisions or units of officers who set standards, handle administrative tasks, and enforce policy. Then there are first line supervisors who handle the day to day direction of officers assigned to the same shift or unit.

As the law enforcement agency grows, so do the number of ranks and specialties. Officers of all ranks are sectioned off into divisions or law enforcement disciplines of responsibility. Rank and divisional command are given to those supervisors who are promoted. As city populations grow, the police departments tasked with keeping the citizens safe grow as well, and it begins to further compartmentalize tasks, functions, and command in an attempt to better serve the public.

Officers are placed into specialized assignments into sections of each organization that can be classified as divisions or bureaus. These divisions and bureaus take on the responsibility to handle specific tasks within the purview of law enforcement, but they utilize a centralized command that handles those tasks for the entire agency. Special weapons and tactics (SWAT), criminal investigations divisions (CID), school resource officers, community prevention officers, and administrative divisions are common fixtures within any municipal department that represent examples of these specialized assignments.

Over the past two decades, events such as the active shooters in Columbine, Colorado, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and a growing mental health crisis have caused the role of the police officer to change from previous generations. These and other types of incidents highlight the importance of streamlining information and command in the federal and state levels throughout agencies. Prior to events during the Baby Boomer generation, those born between 1946-1964, the law enforcement role was held to the common values of protecting and serving (Fry, 2016). The police departments focused almost purely on the mission of crime suppression, reduction, and prevention. In the 1980s, law enforcement agencies nationwide recognized that they had to change their relationship with the communities they serve and the way they performed their duties. Police leaders realized that in order to become more effective, they had to develop relationships with community leaders and invest in communities in order to solve the roots of criminal activity.

Community-oriented policing and problem-oriented policing philosophies were adopted and efforts were made to foster and promote community relations with each police department. These new philosophies meant new ways of relating with citizens, tasking officers with becoming involved on a personal level to gain their trust, confidence, and help solving community problems (COPS, 2014). While the police departments changed the way they acted towards their external customers, the citizens, little to no change took place within the organization and how they managed their internal customers, namely their employees and their development.

Police departments, generally, have maintained to the military style structure and compartmentalization of tasks even though studies have shown that these types of

organizations do not attract Generation X, those born between 1965 to 1980 (Fry, 2016) and Generation Y persons, born between 1981 to 1997 (Fry, 2016), which police departments need to refill their ranks and staffing shortages. Newer generations require and desire empowerment and a sense of ownership in the organizations they work for. Law enforcement agencies should reduce the number of specialized task units and move towards models of organization that empower and broaden the duties of officers by geographic command.

POSITION

Duties and powers of the police officer are defined and established by statute: “It is the duty of every peace officer to preserve the peace within the officer's jurisdiction. To effect this purpose, the officer shall use all lawful means. The officer shall...interfere without warrant to prevent or suppress crime” (Duties and Powers, TX CCP Sec. 2.13). As with most laws, this statute can be interpreted and applied in various ways. The statute was not intended to limit the authority of peace officers but to explain all the things they are responsible for.

Police departments have attempted to fulfill all those responsibilities through staffing and organizational processes that compartmentalize certain responsibilities to employees in their agency. A look at a police department, such as the Los Angeles Police Department (2017), provides an example of how complex a police department can become. At the base of each police department, is the patrol division, typically assigned to conduct random and targeted patrols throughout the jurisdiction. The patrol officer responds to all calls for service within their assigned geographic area. Often times, the geographic area is so large that the patrol officer finds themselves going call

to call and report to report with little time for self-initiated activity, follow up investigations, or community policing efforts. In order for new policing strategies to work, such as community oriented policing, problem-oriented policing, and COMPSTAT, the officer needs the unassigned time and empowerment to pursue those tasks (Famega, Frank, & Mazerolle, 2005).

Proactive efforts are tasked to “special” units that select a very small amount of officers from the organization. Among these positions are investigative specialists called detectives. Agencies that employ a separate command structure for these detectives create unnecessary compartmentalization of information and command. This compartmentalization creates a “not my problem” attitude among officers selected and not selected for those special units. According to Rozuel (2011), compartmentalization causes employees to lose sight of the mission, goals, and values of the agency. This is dangerous territory to venture for an agency whose responsibility it is to keep people safe and solve crimes.

This also results in a loss of ownership among the officers assigned to patrol, detectives, and other specialty service officers. As an agency grows, it usually creates a criminal investigations unit that is responsible to following up on crimes reported by patrol officers. Detectives become internal customers instead of partners striving for the same mission goal patrol has. At some point in growth, agencies begin to create specialized proactive units that are responsible for suppressing certain types of criminal activity or for certain types of environments, like schools and transit systems. These proactive units also become internal customers and are subject to the same barrier problems described above.

Often times, silos of command and information form as the result of these units' autonomy from the rest of the work groups. Solutions to observed problems become suppressed through unnecessary bureaucracy. Gleeson (2013) stated, "Most employees become frustrated with their department and the organization as a whole when they have identified the problems but can't do anything about it" (para. 4). Separation of work groups creates unnecessary barriers to communicate problems and solutions through bureaucracy. Frustration leads to an increased chance that an employee will leave an agency. Some of the biggest reasons any employee will leave any organization are no vision, no motivation, no future, and no connection to the big picture (Efron, 2013). It is easy to see how these silos can contribute to difficulties in staffing for agencies everywhere.

These special units, including separate division detectives, provide an opportunity for a few of the officers in the department but leave many on the outside and stranded within a patrol division, usually considered an entry-level position of the agency. The cases clearly confirm that there is indeed an enormous reservoir of talent, resourcefulness, and commitment in street-level officers that has not been tapped (Goldstein, 2003). A simple look at the math would reveal that not everyone is destined to promote or become a supervisor or specialty unit in current structures. By leaving out the majority of officers from an ability to influence "special" areas of law enforcement, police agencies are not as efficient with their human resources as they could be.

Police agencies have not evolved to retain and recruit member of the newer generations. When recruiting qualified personnel, police departments have to become adaptive to those they wish to employ (Wilson, 2014). Currently, police agencies

employ members of the Baby Boomer generation, Generation X, and are starting to fill their ranks with Generation Y. Baby Boomers are the most conformant group to current organizations' structures but are the most likely to leave the profession due to retirement and age. Law enforcement has failed to adapt to changes in employee desire as the years have gone by. According to polls, Gen X members want work flexibility and will leave a workplace if they do not receive this want (Giang, 2013). Military rank and structure with compartmentalized roles are in direct contrast to what Gen X workers want.

The newest line of officers, those belonging to Gen Y, present similar problems for the classic organizational structure. Members of Gen Y are great at multi-tasking and want to be empowered (Hamill, 2005). It is easy to see how members of this generation would be discouraged from becoming police in an environment where it is expected they do their assigned job and nothing more.

Maintaining job satisfaction amongst police officers and supervisors must become a priority for police departments. Officers that had 6-15 years of tenure reported feeling negative about their profession between issues of job stress, burnout, and physiological issues (Burke, 1989). A strict rank and file system promotes these negative issues when officers are asked to do the same job year after year with little to no chance of change or promotion.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Some may argue that the financial cost for an agency to restructure and re-organize itself may be too great. Any agency that decides to restructure itself has to assess the financial costs and benefits of doing so (Ashe-Edmunds, n.d.). Training

costs would greatly increase due to more officers attending specialized training. But the ability for more officers to do more jobs would improve the resiliency for any command to staff a greater number of staff to specific problems or for short notice items like illness or catastrophe.

Departments can mitigate training costs by developing and using their own certified instructors to teach agency specific specialized training. Departments can also host classes, and normally receive discounts and free training slots from the vendor, in return for providing a location to conduct the training. Training is normally viewed as an investment by most and is a small price to pay in relation to the gains an agency can make in return.

Salary costs will reduce if an agency transitions to using civilian personnel for administrative and non-law enforcement activities, as these personnel typically cost less to recruit, train, and employ. Salary costs will also lower as a result of minimizing or dissolving central command positions and shifting those responsibilities for geographic command structures that are already in place. According to one scale, dissolving one lieutenant position will save on average \$74,000, and one police sergeant position will save an average of \$64,000 a year (Police lieutenant salary, 2018).

Providing geographic command staff with more personnel, derived from centralized positions, will also reduce overtime costs. These initiatives will not get rid of all overtime, but should serve to reduce the number of overtime hours worked. One article stated, "Overtime is not a discretionary category that can simply be managed out of existence" (Bayley & Worden, 1998, p. 5). Overtime costs should also decline as an agency increases the number of multi-talented officers working the street which would

provide commands with more resiliency to short notice absences regardless of who calls in sick.

Another argument to the idea of transitioning detectives and administrative officers to geographic command is that it will cause open cases and projects to be delayed. A slowdown of case work or an excessive number of open cases could lead to a loss of public confidence. A loss of confidence from the public can have negative consequences on the criminal justice system (Wood, 2016). As a detective transitions from an investigative command to a geographic command, there will be cases left open that need to be addressed. During the transitional phase, those cases would need to be dispersed amongst the officers who work those geographic areas. This will be a short term problem that does not compare with the long-term benefits of geographic command. One study found, "Investigators hold valuable information on recurring crime problems and could occupy a central role in developing creative response to stop the next crime instead of responding to it" (Braga, Flynn, Kelling, and Cole p. 2). After the transitional phase, the geographic based detective would be able to lean on those officers assigned to the same area for help with caseload and follow up. The patrol officer would receive the reciprocal effect by working alongside someone with that type of experience and insight.

RECOMMENDATION

In order for law enforcement agencies to adapt to changing times and employee workforce compositions, different organizational structures must be considered and implemented. The private sector typically excels at workforce efficiency, which is necessary for keeping costs low and profits high. Increased training costs would be

offset by higher resiliency to unforeseen absences and unexpected crime incidents. Public agencies, especially law enforcement, need to look towards the private sectors for examples on how to maximize their workforce. Many private industries have evolved towards a flat model type organizations that ask their employees to take on a number of different tasks. In a flat organization, personnel, police officers, and detectives in the case of law enforcement, are empowered to solve problems they encounter with the same supervisory structure, but more partners to get the job done.

In the case of law enforcement, this would mean reassigning detectives, administrative police officers, school resource officers, traffic officers, and others to geographic second or third lines of supervision. Administrative officers would be reassigned to front line positions, such as patrol, or direct support positions for each commander. The addition of these officers to patrol would create smaller districts for each officer and more time to make community contacts and follow up on criminal investigations. In the short term, projects and open cases would be delayed, but the long term effects of having more officers to resolve more problems outweighs this.

First line supervisors, corporals or sergeants, would still be responsible for supervising shifts of officers, but with operational command over all disciplines of officers whether they be patrol, investigative, traffic, and community outreach officers. Second line supervisors, sergeants or lieutenants, would be moved away from divisional or time-specific modes of supervision to geographic areas of supervision. For example, a lieutenant would no longer supervise a patrol division, but they should be held responsible for the law enforcement activities for a sector or area, which would comprise of multiple shifts and disciplines supervised by sergeants. By applying one of

the tenets of COMPSTAT, the supervisor or commander would be given the latitude and discretion to solve criminal and community issues that occur within their area of supervision, using the full range of officers and specialties assigned to their area of responsibility.

Administrative and other non-law enforcement tasks should be transitioned over to civilian personnel. There will be specialty assignments that cannot be dissolved or reassigned, for obvious reasons. These would include assignments to details like SWAT, special victim crimes, homicide units, and task forces. These units involve massive amounts of training and specialization that would be detrimental to those activities and cost-effectiveness to transition those members away. If these types of centralized command items are necessary for an organization, then executive staff should ensure that clear operational plans are in place for deployment, action, and debriefing so as to reduce infighting and confusion between commands.

By transitioning to flat models of organization and geographic commands, law enforcement agencies can better follow the tenets of community policing by focusing on the areas they serve rather than the time of day or division they fall under. Generational studies are advising that Gen X and Gen Y members want to be empowered, are better at multi-tasking, and are more susceptible to feelings of burnout than the predecessors in the Baby Boomer generation. By allowing officers to follow their interests and apply their individual skill sets, law enforcement can keep these newer generations involved and in tune to the agency and profession goals.

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