

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Us vs Them:
The Isolation Culture in Law Enforcement**

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Joseph S. Smart**

**Conroe Police Department
Conroe, Texas
February 2015**

ABSTRACT

Law enforcement officers are meant to serve the public by providing a wide variety of services. Young, idealistic officers enter the service with that fact uppermost in their mind. They want to make a difference, to help, to give back to their society. Along the way, many of these fresh new officers will lose track of that as they begin to succumb to the rigors of the role of a modern police officer. Their enthusiasm begins to wane, and a new sense of self-preservation begins to emerge as they realize that often, the line between the good guys and the bad guys is unclear. This uncertainty as to who is 'on their side', coupled with the very logistics of shift work and the demands of always being available can result in the officer feeling completely cut off from the society that he wants to serve. A new way of looking at the world begins to dominate the officer's thinking: It is "us vs. them."

The causes of the isolation culture within the police service have been studied widely, and many root causes have been proposed. Some feel that it is the fault of the officers themselves, as they bring on their social isolation through misdeeds or abuse. Others believe that the officers simply fall victim to the many pressures exerted on them from different factions. Whatever the cause of the isolation, it is clear that a police agency with an entrenched culture of isolation cannot effectively serve the public. For this reason, it is the responsibility of police agencies; their executives and policy makers, to insure that officers receive adequate training and support to help them recognize the signs of the isolation mindset so that it can be resisted before it becomes entrenched. Further, counseling should be offered to those officers who may already be well along the "us vs them" path to help them restore their sense of place in society.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	3
Counter Position	6
Recommendation	8
References	10

INTRODUCTION

It is seen on the news. It can be found on the web. Bits and pieces of conversations overheard in the halls of the police department reveal: Police officers have a distinctly different world view than that of the average person who is not involved in law enforcement. And with this different view of the world, a view shaped by the constant stress of dealing with all of the issues that law enforcement encompasses, often comes a sense of separation from the rest of society.

A new officer's sense of separation becomes intensified as their law enforcement experience continues to grow. They often find themselves in situations that tend to deepen this feeling of isolation, eventually feeling separated from even their families. The officer will begin to believe that the only place to fit in, to feel accepted, is among their own; among other law enforcement officers. This banding together in a search for acceptance only magnifies the feeling of isolation from society at large while strengthening the sense of belonging among the officers. They begin to believe that no one outside of their culture can understand their point of view.

This is often compounded by negative contacts with people who are not law enforcement officers. A young officer may issue a citation for a violation that he observes, only to have the person receiving the citation call the officer's integrity into question by accusing him of issuing the citation based on race or on a quota. The end result is a mentality that the very citizens that they are sworn to serve have become the enemy.

Another aspect that tends to strengthen this belief, this culture of isolation, is the widely held notion that an officer should be strong and sure of himself. Officers do not

view weakness favorably, and displays of weakness are discouraged. This dimension of the culture of isolation often prevents an officer from reaching out or asking for help with their feelings of separation. Asking for help would be a sign of weakness.

The fact that police officers have a different world view from those not in law enforcement has even been recognized by some professions whose vocation it is to aid those in need. As Chaplain Stephen Lee states in the Introduction to God's Word for Peace Officers "peace officers typically –tragically- hold two beliefs about what the community outside of law enforcement thinks of them. Sadly, they sometimes include the church, and even God, in this assessment: No one really understands. No one really cares" (Lee, 2009, p.9). He went on to illustrate that when he discussed his chosen field, that of ministering to law enforcement, he often found that citizens were bewildered at the need for such service. People tended to immediately grasp the reasons that a chaplain would minister to the needs of those in prison. It is easy for society to comprehend the difficulty of life in prison. Those same people, however, are then surprised that police officers have a need for a dedicated ministry (Lee, 2009).

A police agency that has a widespread culture of isolation is an agency that is failing in its primary mission to protect and serve. Officers who feel separated from, or even a sense of enmity toward, the citizens that they serve cannot do so properly. To prevent this mission failure, and to overcome the hesitancy to reach out for help on the part of the officers, the burden of training and support has to lie with the agency. Law enforcement agencies should mandate preemptive training and support for all officers in attempt to help them recognize the signs of an "us VS them" mentality developing. Only

by taking proactive measures can an agency have a chance to lessen the impact of the culture of isolation.

POSITION

There is little room for doubt that the segment of society that is charged with its protection is held apart from the very society that it has sworn to protect. The culture of isolation is evidenced by many factors, and is reinforced both from inside the culture and by the mainstream society. This is illustrated by the differing use of the phrase 'the thin blue line'. Many in law enforcement have adopted this saying as a means to communicate the belief that law officers are a vastly stretched, overworked, last line of defense between good and evil. Persons outside of law enforcement, however, have adopted 'the thin blue line' as a reference to the huddling together of officers to hide their misdeeds from outsiders.

The idea that a separate culture exists in law enforcement is not new, and it has been embraced in recent studies of police (Paoline, 2003). Additionally, there is evidence that police officers are more likely to identify with a law enforcement culture apart from society due to modern police missions (Woody, 2005). The role of hunter as it pertains to curtailing the illegal distribution of drugs or that of social referee when dealing with criminal gangs can only benefit from a police agency that has a high level of cohesion (Woody, 2005). The prevalence of a culture of isolation can be observed in several ways.

One illustration of the manner in which an officer isolates himself is outlined in the theory of the magic chair (Gilmartin, 2002). He described this as a tuning out, or shutting down, as a response to the stresses of the law enforcement role. The officer

goes home after a shift and sits in his chair, and proceeds to completely shut his family out as he surfs through the channels on TV or engages in a video game. In essence, it is the officer's way of isolating himself from members of his family.

Isolation from family is not limited to the officer's immediate household. An officer who has spent the evening with his extended family will recognize this after a lengthy conversation with an aunt unhappy at receiving a citation or a brother who believes marijuana should be legalized.

This culture of isolation is not limited to an officer's family. The phenomenon of police officer isolation from society has been studied at length. Police Chaplain David Fair (2009) described it as not only a thin blue line, but also an inner core inside of that line. He posits that although some may be allowed behind the line, only cops are allowed into the core. The prevailing opinion appears to be that because of the very nature of what they do, police as a whole distrust the public (Weitzer, 2005).

There is some discrepancy in the opinions as to the source of the isolation of law officers. The biggest contributing factor on both sides of the equation appears to be perception. However, "perception does not always mirror reality" (Weitzer, 2005, p. 21). Many citizens are influenced in their perception of police officers by sources outside of their own personal experience. Media reports of police misconduct, dramatized police television shows, and anecdotal evidence often play a large part in the general public's opinion of law enforcement as a community (Weitzer, 2005).

If a citizen sees or hears of police action that they do not understand, or that is in opposition to their personal beliefs, it becomes easy to view police officers as different from the rest of society (Wasilewski & Olsen, 2010b). Furthering this sense of

separation on the part of the public is the knowledge that police officers have been granted coercive power over them. This often results in non-law enforcement persons being uncomfortable around officers (Woody, 2005). Weitzer (2005) asserted that, although it is not known how often police misconduct actually occurs, enough incidents are uncovered to foster a feeling of mistrust of the police in some citizens.

Often, the public perception of the police is acted on by anecdotal evidence that is based on misconception. For example, a significant portion of the population in some large cities believe that racial profiling is common throughout the nation (Weitzer, 2005). Studies of actual data, however, showed that most police contacts with citizens appear to be correlated with whether the person was involved in some type of criminal activity (Pollock, 2011).

Law enforcement officers have their own views that contribute to the culture of isolation. The very logistics of performing the job can also add to the officer's feeling of isolation. The nature of the work demands that officers be on-duty at all times. The public also expects that an officer will come to their aid, no matter what the time or day of the week it may be. For these reasons, police work varied shifts that often rotate. These shifts must be staffed on weekends, on holidays, during special events. The fact that an officer may not be available to his family or non-law enforcement friends during these times is often the first step toward feeling isolated (Wasilewski & Olson, 2010a).

Young officers learn quickly that their new world is filled with dangers of all kind. These hazards come at him from all directions, and can be physical in nature or less tangible. Officers that stay in the field tend to quickly develop a large capacity for self-preservation (Gilmartin, 2002). As stated by Gilmartin (2002), "Officers are exposed

every day to a series of unknown events, any one of which could be perfectly harmless or lethally dangerous” (Gilmartin, 2002, p. 34). This state of always being on edge, of overt awareness, can cause officers to be distrustful of people who are not in the police profession. At the same time, viewing the world through ever cautious eyes can cause officers to gravitate toward the people that they feel most comfortable with: other cops (Wasilewski & Olson, 2010a).

Another notion that lends to police officer isolation and strengthens the ‘us vs them’ culture is the belief among officers that the public has unrealistic expectations of them, and that citizens are overly critical of law enforcement (Paoline, 2003). This can be further described as a widening of who is included in the “them”. As an officer experiences citizen complaints, media criticism, defense attorneys, and seemingly illogical court decisions, their cynicism grows. Rather than just including the criminal element, the list of *them* is expanded to include anyone against whom the officer feels a need to defend themselves (Wasilewski & Olson, 2010c).

The police role in society is to serve, only so far and so long as the public allows it to do so. Police authority is derived from the will of the people. A police agency whose members have forgotten this due to feelings of separation is an agency that cannot function properly (Wasilewski & Olson, 2010c). For this reason, it is important that police departments put into place a plan of action to help officers identify and address the early stages of the isolation culture.

COUNTER POSITION

Many studies seem to concentrate on the issues of police corruption. Research articles with titles like “Can the Police be Reformed?” (Weitzer, 2005, p. 21) were easily

found, while materials that used the police officer's perspective were not as common. This would lead the casual reader to believe that the culture of police isolation is a product of officer misconduct. Widespread media coverage of incidents like the Rodney King traffic stop or the Rampart Division corruption scandal result in citizens who lose faith in the police as a whole, leading to mistrust. This alone is more than enough to cause the separation of law enforcement from the rest of society (Weitzer, 2005). Further study, however, revealed a much broader spectrum of causation. The theme of a police subculture with distinct characteristics is described again and again (Fair, 2009; Paoline, 2003; Woody, 2005).

One of the very early stages of this culture of isolation for many young officers is their reaction to perceived threats. As Brown states "What must be recognized is that patrolmen lead something of a schizophrenic existence: they must cope not only with the terror of an often hostile and unpredictable citizenry, but also with a hostile – even tyrannical – and unpredictable bureaucracy" (as cited in Paoline, 2003, p.00). Officers begin to learn very quickly the widely held belief in the need to 'cover your ass' (CYA), that is, to always take steps to reduce the risk of personal harm. The dangers that are being avoided are not only threat of physical harm, but also threats to the officer's career and his or her place within their agency. This belief that they must always be on the defensive coupled with a pervasive sense of danger ever looming is a large portion of the feeling of separation that leads to the isolation culture (Woody, 2005).

Yet another school of thought postulates that a young, motivated officer who believes in his oath of office will resist the culture of isolation. This theory implies that officers who have succumbed to the sense of separation have somehow failed in their

primary mission as a public servant by placing their own sense of self ahead of the needs of the community that they serve.

However, research indicated that the opposite is true. Social isolation begins early in a young cop's career and is often rooted in the basic requirements of the job. Shift work, no regard for holidays or weekends, and the frequently unpredictable hours of work can all lead to separation between officer and their friends or family. Further, it is suggested that the fact that an officer has no seniority and is more likely to work undesirable shifts can directly lead to early social isolation (Wasilewski & Olson, 2010a).

RECOMMENDATION

There is little disagreement that there is a distinct social separation that exists between the members of the law enforcement community and the larger society that they work within. Evidence also exists that this isolation is not confined to officers as they relate to the public, but that it reaches into the families of law enforcement, and often, into their own homes.

There are numerous causative factors that contribute to the culture of police isolation. Public expectations, public perceptions, police perceptions, and officers' overdeveloped sense of self-preservation all contribute to the issue. An attempt to single out a cause or place blame would be less than productive in addressing the problem, and likely would further enhance feelings of separation.

Although it would be easy for some to dismiss the culture of isolation as the fault of officers, as a natural result of their misconduct and mistreatment of the public, this would not acknowledge the fact that police officers are also human. They have a

perspective, and are on the receiving end of many of the factors that contribute to isolation. And they often feel that it is the only way to keep themselves free from harm. The very nature of the job of policing can cause even new, dedicated, enthusiastic officers to begin to feel isolated from their families and friends. Eventually, this leads to an entrenched culture of isolation.

Research has shown that the feelings of separation and isolation in police officers have been recognized, and studied, by professionals in the fields of mental health, psychotherapy, and the chaplaincy. This fact would seem to indicate that these issues can and should be addressed in the same manner as similar emotionally distressing issues. Education, counseling, and support for affected officers should be mandated in agencies nationwide.

It is the responsibility of law enforcement agencies, their policy makers, and executives, to put in place a system to educate officers so that they can recognize the signs of the isolation culture in themselves and in their agencies. New police officers should be offered a system of support in the form of a mentor, an older officer who can help guide the new officer through the rigors and pitfalls of the job to help him deal with situations as they arise that could plant the seeds of isolation. Additionally, agencies should offer counseling to officers to help reduce the impact of feelings of isolation.

The nature of law enforcement suggests that there will always be some degree of separation between officers and the public at large, and that it might not be possible to eliminate this gulf entirely. Only by admitting that it exists and taking steps to reduce it can agencies assist their officers in resisting the culture of isolation.

REFERENCES

- Fair, D. J. (2009). *Counseling cops: Learning how to navigate the law enforcement subculture*. Retrieved from annalsofpsychotherapy.com:
[http://www.annalsofpsychotherapy.com/articles/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,pr
 int,0&cntnt01articleid=122&cntnt01showtemplate=false&cntnt01returnid=15](http://www.annalsofpsychotherapy.com/articles/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,print,0&cntnt01articleid=122&cntnt01showtemplate=false&cntnt01returnid=15)
- Gilmartin, K. M. (2002). *Emotional survival for law enforcement*. Tucson, AZ: E-S Press.
- Lee, S. C. (2009). *Introduction to God's Word for peace officers*. Rocklin, CA: Pascoe Publishing.
- Paoline, E. A. (2003). Taking stock: Toward a richer understanding of police culture. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 31, 199-214.
- Pollock, W. K. (2011). *Disproportionate police contact: an examination of the correlates of police contact and of perceptions of fairness in police contact situations across time and generations* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX.
- Wasilewski, M., & Olson, A. (2010a, February 8). *Police isolation, part I*. Retrieved from <http://www.lawofficer.com/article/industry-news/police-isolation-part-i>
- Wasilewski, M., & Olson, A. (2010b, March 23). *Police isolation, part II*. Retrieved from <http://www.lawofficer.com/article/leadership/police-isolation-part-ii>
- Wasilewski, M., & Olson, A. (2010c, April 26). *Police isolation, part III*. Retrieved from <http://www.lawofficer.com/article/leadership/police-isolation-part-iii>
- Weitzer, R. (2005, August 1). Can the police be reformed? *Contexts*, 4(3), 21-26.
- Woody, R. H. (2005). The police culture: Research implications for psychological services. *Professional psychology: Research and practice*, 36(5), 525-529.