The Bill Blackwood
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Uniform color: The Effects on Officer Morale and Public Recognition

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ABSTRACT

The concept of color and it's affects on officer's morale and how the public perceives the officers due to the color of their uniforms. It has been proven that the color of the officer's uniform has a tremendous effect on officer morale and professionalism. This is due to the effects of personal pride and self-image, is closely, associated with the color of the uniform. This color has traditionally been dark blue, it is easily recognized by the public as a member of a public safety organization such as a police officer, fireman, and emergency medical personnel.

For this reason, public recognition and impression of the officer's uniform will be addressed. Well-dressed officers give the impression of an efficient, alert, well-administered department, which is an asset to those it serves. The color of the uniform is a visual means in which a law enforcement agency can convey this message to the public.

In order to assess the potential impact the uniform color has on the officer's morale and the public's perception. A survey of the surrounding agencies was conducted. The results of the survey indicated that area law enforcement agencies within Harris County are moving toward the traditional dark blue uniform color.

The survey included only agencies within Harris County Texas, with departments ranging in size from five to three hundred officers. The survey reveled that these area agencies are moving to the dark blue color of uniforms for their officers. The solid dark blue uniform color is in prominent use by fourteen of the twenty agencies surveyed. The dark blue uniform color has met wide public acceptance by appearing more professional and efficient. The public noted positive changes in officer morale in seventeen of the twenty agencies surveyed, along with positive responses by the officers.

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Introduction

In February 1997, the Humble Police Department implemented a change in the color of the uniforms worn by the officer of the department. The intent of this change was to update the appearance of the officers, while raising the overall morale of the department, there by reflecting a more professional image toward the citizens of our community. This change in uniform color also ended the confusion to the public caused by the previous uniform colors.

From 1982 to 1997 the standard uniform colors of the Humble Police department have been light blue shirts with dark blue pocket flaps and epaulets, with dark blue pants. The department patches were displayed on both shoulders of the uniform. This color ensemble is the same exact uniform color configuration, as the uniform worn by the Houston police department. When it is realized that the city of Humble not only abuts the city limits of Houston, but is completely surrounded by the city limits of Houston. The problem of the color of the uniform then becomes clearer.

This close proximity to an agency with 6,000+ officers wearing the same color uniforms had often caused confusion on the part of the public. New businesses and residents to the area became confused. Citizens often had to ask the responding officers which law enforcement agency was providing service to them.

During this time period both the city of Humble and its police department have grown. The residential population of the city of about 15,000+ has remained steady for the past twenty years. The daily population traveling into and through the city has grown from approximately 30,000 to approximately 250,000 per day according to a traffic study conducted by the Texas State Highway Department. The tremendous growth in the traffic within the city has brought matching growth in business, construction, and criminal

activity. Bringing increased demands on police services and interaction with citizens and surrounding police agencies.

The intent of this study is to determine if changing the color of the uniform will have an affect on the morale of the officers, and the public's perception. It is hypothesized that color, style and appearance of the police uniform are critical in presenting a professional image.

This research will consist of reviewing various books, journals, and magazines. In addition a survey of surrounding departments will be conducted and reviewed, along with the results of a questionnaire given at random to officers from the Humble Police Department. The public's opinion due to the color change will also be reviewed. The results of the study will be to determine if the color of the uniform can affect officer morale, along with a positive perception by the public due to the color change.

The implications for law enforcement is why the image of the officers, and the overall morale of a police department, in addition to public opinion are such an important part of policing and why it's important to maximize these things.

Review of Literature

Every day we select clothing to wear that make us feel confident, makes us feel good or define our status or profession. This paper will assist in establishing the importance of uniform color, style, and the impact that uniforms have on officer morale. The subject of public recognition of officers by their uniforms will also be addressed (Martin 2000).

Every day people across America observe police officers engaged in everyday police activity, such as working traffic, patrol duties, taking reports and taking part in other duties commonly associated with a police officer. During these observation the citizen does not give a second thought to seeing a police officer in uniform, regardless of the style or color. In fact the public expects to see officers in uniform. The first police department to wear uniforms in America was the New York City Police Department, which was established in 1845 (Peak 1997).   But seeing police officers in uniform was not always the case according to (B.Vila, C. Morris (Ed's.) 1999) the initial adoption of the police uniform was a subject of great controversy. And because of this "uniform" controversy it was another eight years after the New York City Police Department was formed, that it's officers wore any type of official identification other than a star shaped badge.

According to (Peak 1997) the people most opposed to the wearing of uniforms was the officers themselves. They contended that the wearing of uniforms were demeaning, unmanly, and undemocratic. The officers contended that by wearing a uniform it would make the job of a police officer more dangerous and harder to catch criminals in the act. But according to Bopp and Shultz (1972) by losing their anonymity it would also make it harder for the officers to shirk their assigned duties. The idea of officers wearing uniforms was also opposed by the general public as being militaristic. But despite the initial controversy that was experienced by the New York City Police Department, uniforms have been widely accepted by police departments, officers, and the citizens alike. Police recruits now see the police uniform as a symbol of pride and accomplishment. These recruits anxiously wait the day that they can wear the uniform and badge of office they worked so hard to earn. The police uniform has been a standard

issue item for patrol officers across the United States for many years; this trend is not likely to change.

Every law enforcement agency is aware and concerned with the visual appearance of its officers. A poor uniform selection can give the impression to the public of a poorly equipped, inadequately trained and inefficient department. A police officer who is well dressed gives the public the impression of an efficient, well equipped, progressive department, that is both well trained and managed. A police uniform is the visual image of the police department itself, and its uniform patrol officers present that image to the public everyday.

According to (Johnson 2001) The police uniform represents a tradition as old as the field of law enforcement. The clean and neatly pressed uniform of the police officer conveys both power and authority. The police uniform sends an unspoken but clearly understood message to the public that this person is a public servant, employed by the local, state or federal government. Also, it identifies a person with the power to arrest and the authority to use force in order to establish public order and legal conformity. Research into the police uniform has been shown as the most likely public symbol to induce the feeling of safety, and to identify them as a person who the public can rely upon to provide help and assistance to those in need.

According to Sharpe (1974) the color of blue is considered by many cultures as being related to something good. Most cultures around the world are filled with examples of the use of the color black to symbolize evil and wickedness. Research indicates that the majority of city police departments throughout America use some variation of the traditional color blue for the police uniform. A quick look back into history will give us some understanding as to how the color blue came to be related to the police uniform that

we are familiar with today. The first modern police force was established in London

England in 1829. They developed the first clothing apparel for their police force, the

famous "Bobbies" of London. These first officers wore the dark blue, paramilitary-style

uniform. The dark colored blue helped to distinguish the London police from the British

military forces who wore red and white uniforms (Johnson 2001). Due to the selection of

the dark blue color of the "Bobbies" uniform, the New York City Police Department

adopted this same color for their uniforms. As other law enforcement agencies across

America came into existence they also tended to adopt similar variations of the color blue

for use on their uniforms. The style of the police uniform has continued to evolve,

becoming more comfortable, while maintain a professional appearance.

First appearances are very important according to Sheriff Ted Paxton; uniform

officers are often the first and only contact the department has with its citizens (Law and

Order 2002). Generally speaking, police officers have a tremendous pride in the type of

work that they have chosen for their careers. This same pride should be reflected in the

uniforms that they wear. A sharp, attractive looking police uniform that projects a

professional looking image not only enhances the self image of the officers but it

improves the departments image to the community (Law and Order 2001).

The pride that an officer feels while wearing the police uniform can be linked to

the officer's morale. If the officer does not feel pride in the uniform they wear it is often

reflected in their morale. Low morale within a police agency often makes for poor

representation for that agency, and substandard services to the community. Low morale is

often contagious, which alone can have disastrous effects on any police agency. When

the police uniform are sharp and professional looking the officer's attitude is changed.

The officers show a greater pride in their jobs and consequently their job performance is

often enhanced. By simply changing color of the officers uniform is shown to have a positive effect of the officers attitude and morale. This change is shown to have a corresponding effect on the public's attitude toward the police (Martin 2000).

New Jersey, Chief James L. Benson remarked that the new uniforms worn by his department has generated a tremendous esprit de corps. The officers look more professional and act more professional in their public contacts. This has led to positive relations and a better image with the community (Law and Order 1999). Due to the demands placed on the uniform industry by law enforcement agencies for better more professional looking uniforms, the industry has made great advances over previous years. These advances have been made in fabric development, enhanced comfort, longer wearing, retaining their colors longer while projecting a more positive and professional appearance (Law and Order 2002).

In the United States a significant shift has been taking place in the uniforms that are being adopted by law enforcement agencies. During the last ten years a shift toward military style uniforms has prevailed. This begs an important question. Does the police uniform command or demand respect? The defining differences between the uniforms of the armed services and the uniforms worn by those entrusted to guarding the peace, have become blurred. Because we live in a democratic society, the uniforms worn by its law enforcement officers must strike a delicate balance. The desire to present an authoritative, smart appearance needs to be tempered in order to maintain the separation between law enforcement who's job is to protect the citizens within our country, and the military who exists to protect the country from aggressors beyond our nations borders. The proper selection of the style and color of the police uniform may be the deciding factor in achieving this goal (Dervis 2002).

According to (Sharpe 2001) a poll was conducted into the style and color of the police uniform and its impact on the public. The poll that was conducted indicated that the uniforms worn by the police could shape citizen's impressions. The respondents stated that the more professional a police officer looks, the more likely it is that the public's response will be positive.

The reason for police officers wearing uniforms was to gain the attention of the citizens and to convey the notion of a well-trained and disciplined civil servant. With this in mind it should be noted that some departments are allowing officers in certain assignments to wear casual clothes on one day of the week, usually Friday. This is contrary to the two things that the public is demanding of police agencies across the country. The items that the public wants to be addressed are for their police to be more "visible", and to be more "professional". Both items of public concern argue for police uniforms (Law and Order 2000).

In the 2002 issues of Law and Order articles were published about the Best Dressed Competition Winners. These are some of the recent comments made about the importance of the police uniform. Captain Ken Betterton of the Utah State Highway Patrol stated," To the public the uniform distinguishes the officer from all others as a beacon of hope and trust, if clearly identifiable and worn correctly. If anything decent came from the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11 it would be a renewed respect for Law Enforcement. This is the noblest profession of all, we must each and everyone look and act the part America deserves and earned".

According to Sgt. Joseph Quatrone of the Lodi Police Department, NJ. " The uniform change, along with the new black and white police vehicles, has had a positive effect with the members of the department and the community. Morale is high and the

department members are more self-confident. The uniform standards have increased due to specific specifications worn by each officer".

According to Sheriff Ted Paxton of the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office, GA., stated that its proud of its employees and realizes that they are often the first and only contact the department has with other citizens. Therefore, first appearances are very important. " The Forsyth County Sheriff's Office uniform was designed to project a command appearance while at the same time providing the wearer with a functional, easily maintained and comfortable garment" (Law and Order 2002).

Sergeant Jack Faenza of Long Hill Township Police Department in New Jersey said it best. Their department won the Law and Order Best Dressed Competition in 1999. "You never get a second chance to make a first impression". He stated, " A clean professional appearance is what people will remember from the first time you make contact with them. They will look at and, many times form an opinion of what type of officer you are before you speak a word. (Law and Order 1999).

Every police department is concerned with the visual impression given by its officers. A smartly dressed uniformed officer gives the impression of a progressive department, with good morale, alert, efficient and asset to the community. Uniforms seem to both express, and to be the cause of, attitudes, and actions and reactions. A police uniform is the essence of the image presented by the patrol officer. The first impression – and usually the most lasting – is the image presented by the uniformed patrol officer (Martin 2000).

Methodology

Does the color of the police uniform affect officer morale, and public opinion? To answer this question a geographic survey was conducted. The survey examined agencies within Harris County. These departments located within Harris County ranged in size from five to three hundred officers. The results of the survey indicated that there was a change in the color of the uniforms of the majority of the agencies that were sent survey questionnaires. The survey results indicate that the uniform color has changed to the traditional dark blue.

While assessing the results of the questionnaires it was determined that ten departments changed uniform color. Fourteen departments indicate a change in officer morale and public recognition. A written survey was used in order to establish what the past and present uniform colors were of these agencies, and if they had changed uniform colors, what was the reason for the change? What is the public's perception of this new uniform color? A copy of both of the survey questionnaires that were used to compile the information contained in this research is included in the appendices.

Findings

Of the twenty departments surveyed the following results were obtained. The previous uniforms of the twenty departments ranged from unknown prior colors to gray/blue – tan/blue – light blue/ dark blue – tan/green – tan/brown (for details see attached graphs).Fourteen departments reported that the present color of their uniforms to be dark blue. This is the same traditional dark blue that is commonly referred to as the Los Angeles Police Department (L.A.P.D.) style and color of police uniform. Fourteen reported an improvement in officer morale. Fourteen departments reported a change in public's perception and an improvement in

professionalism due to the new uniform. Five of the surveyed departments reported no change in the public's opinion due to the change in the color of the uniform.

Of the sixteen officers of the Humble Police Department that were surveyed at random the following information was obtained. Sixteen officers advised that the prior uniforms worn by the department confused too many citizens. These citizens thought the responding patrolman were Houston Police officers. All sixteen officers in the survey stated that they believed that public perception of the department had improved due to the change in uniform color. Some of the officers commented that prior to the uniform change the department looked like the Houston Police Department.

Of the sixteen officers surveyed all of them commented that they felt the overall morale of the department had been greatly improved by the change in the uniform color. In 1997, after sixteen years, the Humble Police Department changed the color of its uniforms to the traditional dark navy blue. The department patch and its colors were also changed to a dark blue patch, with gold borders and lettering, with the city seal with all of it's various colors included, placed in the center of the patch. In 2002 a new badge was designed for the department. The department also purchased the design rights to this badge. Which is a L.A.P.D. style badge shield with the City of Humble seal, in a bronze finish located in the center. The shield itself has a polished silver finish that has the officers rank, city, and badge numbers displayed on three separate polished gold ribbons displayed on the front of the shield.

All officers regardless of rank wear this same badge as previously described. The new uniform color, and badge along with a new more professional police identification with identical wallet size badge and custom leather identification wallet. These changes have come a long way in giving the officers of the Humble Police Department a unique look, while providing a boost in officer self image, morale, professionalism.

The survey results have identified that the uniform color of choice at least in Harris County appears to be returning to the traditional color of dark navy blue. This has long been the color that the citizens most associate with public servants in the emergency services divisions of public safety. This association is most likely due to the long standing tradition of dark blue uniforms dating back to the New York City Police Department's choice of this same color back in 1853. Which is preceded in history by the London Metropolitan Police Department use of the dark blue paramilitary style uniform, which dates back to 1829.

Discussions/Conclusions

This research and study was made in order to determine if the color of the police uniform had an affect on officer morale, and if this color change reflected a more professional image to the general public. It was hypothesized that the color, style and overall appearance of the police uniform is important when an agency wants to develop and convey by visual means a more positive and professional image to the general public.

Twenty police agencies in Harris County, Texas participated in the survey. All twenty agencies answered the survey. Ten of the departments responding to the

survey indicated that their agencies had made a recent change in the color of their uniforms. The results of the survey indicated that ten of the twenty changed the color of their uniforms. And of the twenty departments surveyed fourteen departments had changed their uniform color to the traditional dark blue. The departments who had recently made this change indicated that their previous uniform colors ranged from gray/blue – tan/blue – light blue/dark blue – tan/green – tan/brown.

A conclusion was made based on the responses from the twenty agencies that participated in the survey. Of the ten agencies that had changed from their previous uniform colors, nine had changed to the traditional dark blue police uniform. This change had taken place over the twelve years, which indicated that this change was made gradually.

The results of this research indicate that the traditional dark blue police uniform are making a significant return in popularity within the policing community of Harris county.

The reason for this change in uniform color has also addressed the other issue of officer morale. Of the twenty agencies surveyed fourteen indicated a positive change in officer morale due to the change in uniform color. And fifteen agencies surveyed stated that there was a positive change in public perception due the color change. Fourteen agencies stated that they have not noticed a change in officer morale. This appears to be due the fact that these agencies have maintained the traditional dark blue police uniform for many years. These same agencies also indicated that the reason that they have kept this traditional dark blue uniform is because it is very recognizable by the public, and is in keeping with a professional appearance.

The results of the survey supported the hypothesis. The research results validate that by changing the color of the officers uniform that it has a positive and direct affect on the officer's morale. The change in uniform color has shown that it gives a boost to the officers self image, and instills pride in their appearance, and has promoted professionalism within the rank and file of the departments surveyed. The results of the research survey support the theory that the public's perception can be altered in a way that is more positive and receptive by simply changing the color of the officer's uniform.

This study is relevant to the law enforcement community because it proves that a well-dressed officer has higher morale and improved self-image, giving them greater pride in their appearance. These traits reflect a more professional image of the department to the public, thereby bringing about a positive change in the citizens feeling and attitudes toward the police.

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Appendixes

<u>Department Survey:</u>

1). What color is your current uniform?

2). What was the prior color of your uniform?

3). Have you been approached by a citizen who expressed their feelings about the current color of your uniform? And if so what was their comment?

4). What is the perception of the surrounding agencies on the color and appearance of the present uniform?

5). When the uniform color change was made did it affect officer morale?

6). Was the change in morale positive or negative?

7). Since the change in the color of the uniform, have you ever been confused with another law enforcement agency?

8). Does the current uniform appear more professional?

Name of officer completing this survey:

Uniform Survey Questionnaire:

Agency: Officer: Rank:
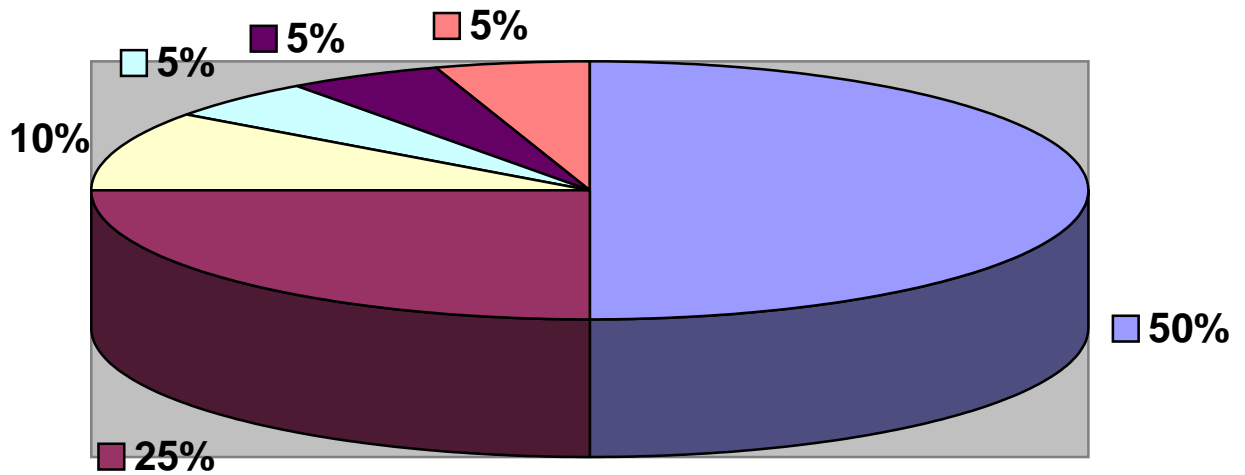
Address: P.S.#   Total Officers:
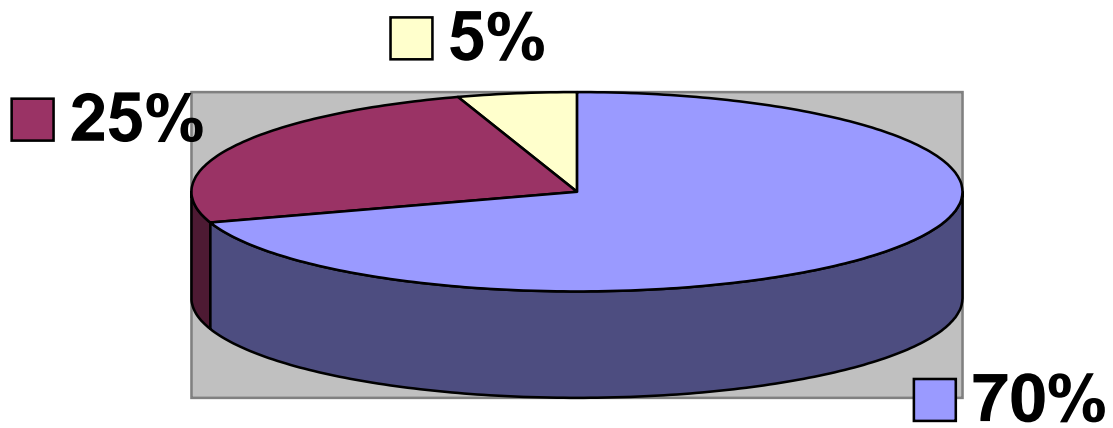

1). What are the current colors of your agencies present patrol uniform?
        Shirt color: Pants color:

2). How long have has your agency been wearing your present uniform?

3). If this is not your agencies original uniform, what color combination was the prior uniform?
        Shirt color: Pants color:

4). If your agency has changed uniform colors, what was the reason for the change?

5). Has the citizens in your jurisdiction perceived a difference in professionalism and approachability of the patrol officers due to the change in the color of your uniform?

6). Have you noticed a difference in officer moral due to the change of uniform color, and if so what type of change?

7). How was the color of your uniform selected? (Such as; by surrounding agency survey/ by administration / by a uniform selection board / by popular vote of the officers, etc.)

8). Was the selection of your uniform color based on officer safety issues, or for appearance purposes, or both?

9). Was the selection of your uniform color based on a popular trend within the law enforcement community?

10). Has the color of your uniforms been widely approved and accepted by the patrol officers?

11). Do the officers in your agency feel that the color of the uniforms look more professional than their previous uniform color?
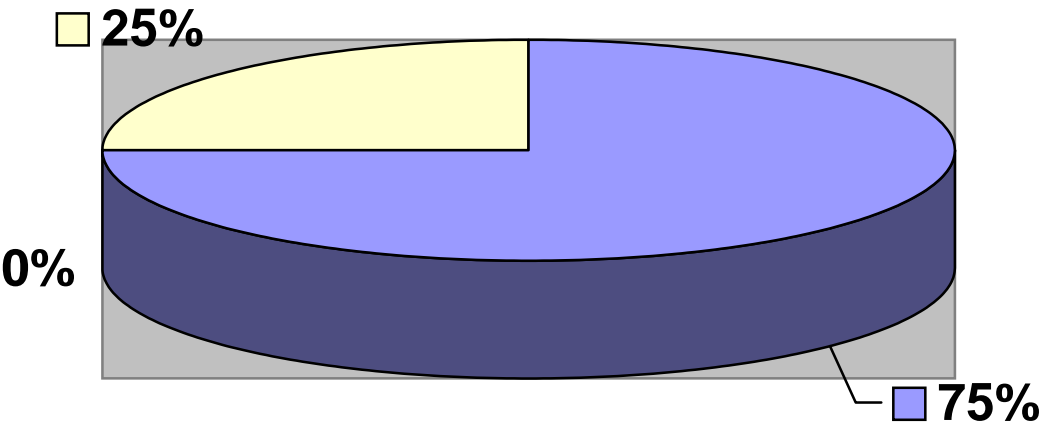
PREVIOUS UNIFORM COLORS

Legend:
- Light Blue/ Dark Blue
- Dark Blue/ Dark Blue
- Tan/Dark Blue
- Gray/ Dark Blue
- Tan/ Brown
- Gray/ Black

5%
5%
5%
10%
50%
25%

CURRENT UNIFORM COLORS

Legend:
- ☐ Dark Blue/ Dark Blue
- ☐ Light Blue/ Dark Blue
- ☐ Tan / Dark Blue

5%

25%

70%

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

| | Positve | Negative | No Change |

25%

0%

75%

AFFECT ON MORALE

Positive   **Negative**
No Change

5%

10%

85%