

Policing Strategies for the 21st Century

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Public trust in American policing has been shaken across the nation by the images filling the airwaves beginning in Ferguson last summer and continuing with each new disturbing video that emerges every couple of weeks. These tragic incidents have sparked intense focus on the culture and practices of policing and has ignited a necessary national conversation. As we embark on this dialog it is critically important to consider the wide range of factors that impact the environment in which police operate and consider strategies that are most likely to increase public trust and improve public safety. I'd like to highlight two of the major factors.

The first factor is the absence of a national coherence in policing. We have 18,000 local police departments. That means 18,000 different cultures reflecting the policies and practices that are the product of 18,000 local governments serving communities with a diverse range of values and expectations. Agency size ranges from one-officer to more than 34,000. About half of the 18,000 agencies have less than 10 officers. All of those agencies operate in one of 50 states, each with their unique system of justice that dictates how criminal cases are initiated, processed, and adjudicated. Although many states mandate peace officer certification and standards for hiring and training, most states exert limited control over the routine operations of local police departments. Outside of Consent Decrees and the distribution or withholding of Federal funds, the influence the Federal Government has on local policing is also limited. Bottom line – there is no single description of police culture and practice in the United States. The environments and challenges faced by police departments vary widely, and control and oversight is almost exclusively local.

The second factor to consider is that police departments do not operate independently. In most cities, Police Chiefs are hired and fired by a Mayor, or another elected Municipal Executive. Most Sheriffs are elected by the voters they are sworn to serve and protect. When police exert control over citizens, they do so at the behest of officials elected by the people. Crime control

strategies don't emerge in isolation. Nor do decisions about police accountability. Those decisions are made by independently elected local officials and Prosecutors. Too often the scrutiny of disturbing incidents begins and ends with the police department with little examination into those forces outside the agency that influence priorities and practices. The importance of a broader focus of inquiry was illustrated by the recent examination by the Department of Justice into the government practices in the City of Ferguson. The findings serve as a powerful example of the influence of governing forces outside of the police department itself.

Ideas for improving policing in the 21st Century need to be considered with these two important factors in mind. Most changes in policies and procedures must be adopted by local governments in order to be implemented. For example, a requirement to use body cameras must consider local and state laws related to the gathering, management, and disclosure of data as well as local and state laws protecting individual privacy. These changes will take time and require changes in state laws, with some barriers simply insurmountable.

There are, however, meaningful steps that can be taken at various levels of government, without changing laws. These steps will improve the culture of policing and expand police training in ways that contribute to increased public trust and improve public safety. The recommendations of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing contain a range of actions that can be implemented immediately, as well as longer term strategies. One of the areas of focus contained in the recommendation relates to police training practices. I've attached an academic paper I co-authored that was recently published by The Kennedy School at Harvard and the National Institute of Justice. This paper expounds on the importance of addressing the leadership culture in police departments and suggests a path toward improving that culture through more effective training strategies. I hope these ideas will be beneficial as this committee explores improvements to policing in the 21st century.