

POLICE OFFICER RESILIENCE AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Police organizations in America have largely dismissed a holistic lens through which to look when it comes to sustaining the first responder's performance success over a career. Additionally, police organizations often overlook the social costs of police officer stress that can, in part, contribute to ineffective or broken community relations. Contemporary science offers compelling evidence that acute, chronic and cumulative stressors of police work erode an officer's capacity to be well physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. It can be argued that a "corporate un-wellness" persists in the business of policing and this has significant ripple effects in American communities, both large and small. Police organizations provide critical, technical skills training, both formally and on the job, for new employees. Throughout the career, this technical skill set is practiced, trained and developed. Very little resources, if any, are invested in training beyond technical skills in public safety; training in emotional intelligence, holistic wellness, cognitive performance, social psychology, sociology, economics and other disciplines that study phenomena which have heavy influence on individual and community behaviors. This focus on police technology fosters a culture of process thinking and often linear problem solving and creates a gap between a community and their police agency. This police-citizen disharmony can feed further distrust between the people and their government ultimately leading to a spiral of social problems, both acute and chronic. In order to repair broken community relationships in the 21st Century, police organizations must shift their administrative culture to allow investment in police officer wellness in multiple human dimensions- body, mind and spirit.

Keywords: resilience, emotional intelligence, police culture, cumulative stress, critical incident stress management, community policing, police wellness, holistic wellness

INTRODUCTION

Police officers are held to a high standard of conduct framed by the American Constitution, federal and state law, case law, and a complex system of rules and procedures that impact federal, state, tribal and local police entities. This conduct standard is further defined, although not always so clearly, by external social forces such as community expectations and internal forces such as organizational culture. Officers are expected to consistently meet, or in some cases, exceed these behavioral standards. The American Police Institution (defined as the collective organization, culture and system of uniformed, publicly provided police services in the United States, and hereinafter referred to as the Police Institution) demands that police officers meet the standards and have developed a finely tuned administrative system to manage compliance. The Police Institution has acknowledged the stressors of police work, often with supportive efforts and programs for officers, yet it has largely dismissed a holistic approach to support officer wellness and train to resiliency. Additionally, it has dismissed the correlation between officer resilience and community building. As a consequence, police-community relations suffer and our police officers suffer. Within the Police Institution may be a level of corporate suffering that prohibits community building and the achieving of the full potential in police-citizen relations. The Police Institution is missing the lessons of science, in particular the lessons learned over the last decade at war

from our nation's military services regarding resilience and post traumatic stress. Through a cultural shift, followed by program and system change within, the Police Institution can work to make its police officers resilient and improve community health and livability. This change must be championed from both within and from engagement from the outside of the Police Institution; from communities and from academia. All of us have a stake in the outcome because at stake are the health of our broader police-citizen relationships, the wellness of our Police Institution, and the livability of our communities.

POLICE OFFICER WELLNESS

A police officer's compliance with high behavioral standards is directly related to their personal state of wellness in body, mind and spirit. Much has been written in professional publications of the Police Institution that demonstrates an understanding of this notion. In particular, Mr. Samuel L. Feemster has either authored or edited numerous articles as part of his leadership effort within the Federal Bureau of Investigation to champion positive change in how officer wellness is viewed, and more importantly, acted upon throughout the nation (Feemster, 2009). Feemster has been on the leading edge of holistic wellness management and science. A review of literature suggests that elsewhere in the nation, within the Police Institution, other positive efforts are ongoing; yet often these fail to break out of an historical, linear approach that addresses physical fitness and only dabbles in other dimensions of wellness. Additionally, historical Police Institution approaches place the burden of wellness on the police officer squarely, with very little support to nurture and sustain a state of well being. The Police Institution typically offers programs such as peer support, Critical Incident Stress Management, employee assistance programs, and periodic training not widely available to all members of an organization on emotional survival. These programs are important, yet arguably ineffective in the absence of preventative efforts to build and sustain resilience.

The Police Institution can learn from the United States Army and the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program which is designed to increase psychological strength and positive performance and to reduce the incidence of maladaptive responses of the entire U.S. Army (Cornum, Mathews, Seligman, 2011). The Police Institution has developed an expertise in maladaptive stress response. This expertise has developed as a result of police officers who reach a point where their maladaptive stress response behavior has negative personal, organizational, and community consequences. It is time we build a similar expertise in resilience.

TOXICITY OF POLICE WORK

Simply put, police work has a toxic effect on the wellness of officers that degrades the officer's state of resiliency. Over the course of a career, police officers are exposed to a full continuum of human suffering. The cumulative exposure of both acute and chronic trauma degrades an officer's wellness. In addition to the operational stressors of police work, officers are exposed to varying levels of administrative stressors, such as shift work, labor-management conflicts, rigid risk management processes, professional standards audits and investigations, law suits, complaints, and budget or resource scarcity. The stress of the police profession comes at officers from all directions, at all times, at varying intensities with very little predictability.

Our present state of law enforcement brings us a violent landscape where felonious assaults and homicides of law enforcement officers have spiked dramatically (www.leomf.org). Police officers are attending more funerals as a result of line of duty deaths and these bring potential for considerable negative consequences to officer wellness. Additionally, the pressure of policing the Occupy Wall Street movement has significantly impacted communities, organizations, and police officers. As one, now infamous, police lieutenant in Davis, California learned, the world is not only watching, we are also judging with little due process and understanding of the forces of the system that create unacceptable behavior (Madrigal, 2011). After decades of research as a psychologist and professor, and after extensive research of the Abu Ghraib prison incident, Philip Zimbardo poses a rhetorical question worth

considering in our context when he asks if the bad actor is simply a bad apple, or if the barrel is bad and good actors become victims of sort to the “corrosive influences” of situational forces (Zimbardo, 2007). The Police Institution has allowed a culture to evolve that may have some “bad barrel” issues, namely the neglect of police officer resiliency. The forces of police culture are very strong, and have the potential to be toxic.

RESILIENCE

For purposes of this discussion, resilience can be defined as the ability to cope well with high levels of ongoing disruptive change; to sustain good health and energy when under constant pressure; to bounce back easily from setbacks; to overcome adversities; to change to a new way of working and living when an old way is no longer possible; and to do all this without acting in dysfunctional or harmful ways (Siebert, 2005). A strong state of resilience allows police officers to mitigate the toxicity and stressors of police work in order to both sustain wellness and to provide empathic and effective police services to those in crisis.

Police officers should be trained in nurturing and sustaining resilience, to include a strong holistic wellness in all of the dimensions previously mentioned as body, mind, and spirit. Police Institution systems and culture should be designed to recognize, support and sustain resilience in their employees. One key ingredient to developing and sustaining resilience in police officers is Mindfulness. While mindfulness is a concept in many contemplative traditions in both Eastern and Western civilization, for purposes of this discussion it can best be understood through the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program that comes to us from the University of Massachusetts Medical School (Kabat-Zin, 1990). Liz Stanley used this model in a study of U.S. Marines which shows promising results for training MBSR to police officers and other first responders (Stanley, E., Jha, A., 2009). Emotional intelligence has direct application to the field of law enforcement and offers demonstrable value toward the comprehensive skill set required to successfully police America’s communities (Goleman, 1998). Training police officers in emotional intelligence, yoga, mindfulness is outside the “administrative” comfort zone and therefore not readily accepted as viable approaches to officer wellness.

The Police Institution makes a critical error in rejecting programs such as these. The U.S. military has embraced these contemporary approaches over the last decade that the nation has been at war against global terrorism. We must learn from our military services and adopt and modify some of the efforts toward warrior resilience.

CONCLUSION

The Warrior Ethos of the American Police Officer is a noble one; time and again officers prove themselves heroes in service to the American Public. Sadly, the police officer is often left to their own capacity to cope with the internal and external stressors of the job. The actions of the police officer are measured and held accountable through media reports, the criminal and civil court system, and their own administrative professional standards systems. This accountability is necessary, yet the Police Institution has evolved to become nearly exclusively focused on a risk management paradigm and this accountability management.

When the Police Institution invests in police officer resilience, the second and third order affects are enormous and consistent with the goals of excellence in service and community building. Officers who are well will provide better police services; officers who are resilient will sustain wellness through acute and chronic trauma. The Police Institution should look at the issue of officer wellness from a holistic lens, and take action to develop a culture and systems that build and nurture resilience in its people. Communities should demand police officers that are well and resilient in order to achieve the best possible police-citizen relationships and livability.

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