

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2013

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, <http://bjaleader.org>, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Bill Geller, project strategist Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

Policing in the 21st Century: Leadership Challenges and New Realities Gun Policy

by

Darrel W. Stephens

Introduction

Police leaders have always faced difficult challenges in the effort to create and maintain safe communities. From the widespread civil disobedience of the 1960s and '70s to the Occupy Movement that began in 2011, and from gang warfare to Internet predators, the police have always needed to adapt to changing political, social and economic circumstances.

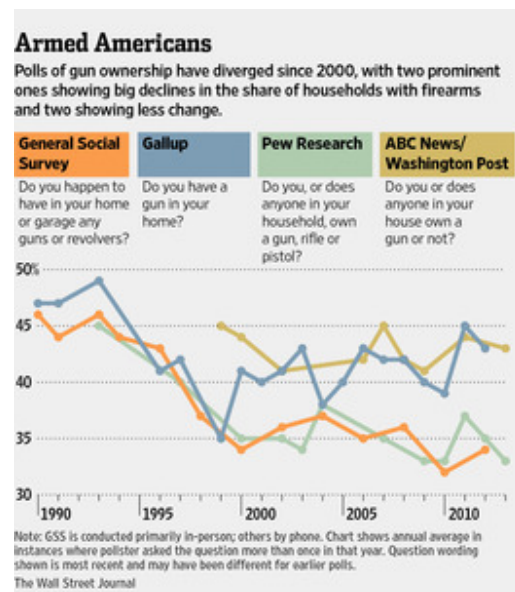
Some changes have been transformative in shaping contemporary policing strategies. Advances in technology, improved education and training, and increasingly sophisticated analytical modeling have all had significant positive impacts on the profession. Other changes have presented daunting challenges for police leaders. Managing communication in the hyper-connected world of social media is testing most agencies' abilities to balance transparency and investigative integrity. And, as departments wrestle with the most significant funding cuts that current leaders have ever seen, a growing

number of police observers suggest that current policing strategies in America are simply not sustainable because of the cost (Gascon and Foglesong 2010). As the police grapple with a diminished ability to deliver services, communities and businesses have turned to private security to improve their sense of safety. This trend leaves high-poverty neighborhoods, where crime is concentrated, even more vulnerable because police cannot be as attentive and cannot afford to fill the gaps.

The leadership challenges these issues present led the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to create the Executive Session on Police Leadership. Its focus is on developing the quality police leaders that America’s communities need in the 21st century. One way of developing police leaders is to identify the challenges they are likely to encounter and provide them with insight that might help address these challenges more effectively. The Executive Session has developed a series of brief white papers to describe the challenges and realities. This paper addresses gun policy.

Guns in America

Guns are part of the fabric of American culture—estimates of the number of gun owners in America range from 50 to 90 million, with the number of guns estimated to be 280 million (Bialik 2013). The 2nd Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states, “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” These 27 words have been the source of enormous controversy over what the founders intended. Courts have heard countless cases spanning almost 200 years in an effort to apply the 2nd Amendment to various ordinances, statutes, and laws that have been enacted across the country. The debate over the “right to keep and bear arms” is intense between those who believe that any restriction on gun ownership is in conflict with the 2nd Amendment and those who believe that reasonable regulations do not interfere with this right.



Obviously, gun policy is critically important to the police. Guns are used in the commission of many violent crimes. In 2011, 68% of the murders in the United States were committed with firearms. In that same year, firearms were used in 88% of the incidents in which police officers were feloniously killed (FBI 2012).

Historically, the police have been as conflicted as the American public on gun policy. Opinions vary by region of the country and by an officer’s level in the organization. While there is considerable agreement on background-check legislation, there is disagreement among law enforcement personnel on bans of assault weapons, high capacity magazines, and recognizing concealed-carry permits nationally (Williams 2013). Police executives generally support stronger gun legislation while many of their officers oppose it.

Current Realities

Gun violence takes a huge toll on America in terms of deaths, injuries, and costs:

- Firearm-related deaths and injuries resulted in medical and lost-productivity expenses of about \$32 billion in 2005 (Webster et al. 2012).
- The average estimated direct and indirect costs of violent crime in eight geographically diverse U.S. cities were more than \$1,300 for every adult and child (Webster et al. 2012).
- In the United States, firearms deaths averaged 32,300 annually between 1980 and 2007 (FICAP 2011).
- Firearms are involved in 67% of homicides, 50% of suicides, 43% of robberies, and 21% of aggravated assaults (FICAP 2011).

The December 2012 tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut in which 20 children and 6 adults lost their lives in gunfire spurred a new round of debate and legislative proposals to strengthen gun laws at state and federal levels. At the state level, there have also been proposals to relax gun laws even further. An analysis of state legislative proposals by the *Wall Street Journal* indicated that, as of April 4, 2013, five states had passed legislation that would strengthen gun laws while nine enacted legislation that would weakened them (Nickas and Palazzolo 2013).

States with the most [gun] laws had a mortality rate 42% lower than those states with the fewest laws. The states with the strongest laws had firearm-related homicide rates 40% lower and firearm-related suicide rate was 37% lower than states with fewer laws. (Alcindor 2013)

At the federal level, the Senate introduced legislation in January 2013 that would ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, require background checks on all firearm sales, prohibit gun trafficking, and improve school security. All of these initiatives failed in a series of votes taken on April 16, 2013 on several bills and amendments. To pass, they required at least 60 votes to avoid a filibuster—background checks received a majority vote but failed by six votes.

Calls to Action for Police Leaders

Guns and the policies that governments have established to manage them create significant challenges for police leaders. They must deal with the violence in their communities while navigating a political landscape with widely divergent views on the role guns play. There are those who believe fewer guns would reduce the impact of violence, while others argue that more guns allow individuals to protect themselves. Police executives also must be concerned about their officers, who face ever-increasing numbers of guns on the street because of concealed- and open-carry laws. These realities require strong leadership and thoughtful responses from leaders, including:

- **Engaging in the debate on appropriate gun policy.** While police leaders must tread carefully when weighing in on various legislative proposals, it is imperative

for law enforcement to maintain a clear and present voice in the debate. Political leaders, advocacy groups, and community members have strong feelings on these issues and aggressively pursue their points of view. A thorough understanding of the issue and command of the facts is essential.

- **Developing a vision of what “safe and sustainable” means** for the community that takes into account all of the variables (e.g., demographics, employment profile, housing/real estate market, and crime rates) that impact its wellbeing. Ideally, this should be a highly collaborative process that engages people from throughout the community.
- **Providing training and guidelines to officers** on the street about encountering the increasing number of people who carry guns—both concealed and open—in a way that helps them to safely and effectively do their jobs.
- **Creating violence reduction strategies** that make policies and expectations clear for officers and can be explained to, even accepted by, the public. For example, use of “stop and frisk” tactics in an effort to take illegal guns off the street may be useful, especially for officers assigned to high-violent crime areas of a community. However, there are legal implications and public acceptance is mixed.

Developing Police Leaders

Developing future leaders in policing is the collective responsibility of the organization, professional associations, educational institutions, and each individual. Developing tomorrow’s leaders involves training, education, challenging assignments, and experience with working on important issues. Managing gun violence and creating thoughtful policy are important issues for policing, and the opportunities for developing leaders include:

- Working on the development of the organization’s policy to guide officers’ actions in field interview situations.
- Serving as an instructor in training sessions on the organization’s policy.
- Auditing and assessing instruction on the organization’s policy to identify the effectiveness of trainings and to recommend improvements.
- Researching programs such as gun buy-backs or amnesty events.
- Representing the organization in community meetings on gun violence.
- Representing the organization in discussions with political leaders on gun policy.
- Participating in discussions and activities to more fully understand the different views people hold on gun policy.

- Writing opinion pieces for local news or professional publications on gun policy proposals.

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