
Statement of Principles on Democratic Policing

The Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing spoke of the difficulties of trust and legitimacy that police are facing today. Those problems are very real. We believe that adherence to the principles of Democratic Policing can provide concrete tools for addressing these problems successfully.

The idea of Democratic Policing follows from the famous dictum of Sir Robert Peel that “the police are the public and the public are the police.” Peel was the founder of London’s Metropolitan Police Force in 1829 and his Principles of Law Enforcement remain justly celebrated to this day. Peel went on to say that although “the police [are the] only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention” to the duties of policing, those “duties ... are incumbent on every citizen.” His point was to emphasize that police officials are members of the community, but also that the community—all of us—must take responsibility for policing. Policing must be a shared endeavor.

The idea that “the police are the public and the public are the police” implies certain important principles:

- I. There should be robust engagement between police departments and the communities they serve around the policies and priorities of policing.
- II. When possible, policing practices should be guided by rules and policies that are adopted in advance of action, are transparent, and are formulated with input from the public.
- III. Police departments should develop and use sound metrics of success that encompass all of the goals of policing, including community trust.

Community Engagement

The Task Force’s Final Report called repeatedly for “community engagement” with the police. Although community *policing* has been a fixture of the American landscape for over thirty years, community *engagement* requires something more. Community policing generally happens at the bottom—through interactions between individual officers and members of the public—but it is essential to also have engagement at the top where policy decisions are made.

Achieving this sort of community engagement poses a variety of challenges. At present, we do not have a ready formula or playbook for how to go about it. It is necessary both to develop workable models of engagement, and to find the resources to do so. Similarly, it can be difficult to identify precisely who speaks for “the community.” Thus, it is important to develop a range of approaches to connecting with residents, particularly in some of our more heavily policed communities.

At the same time, community members must recognize that engagement is a mutual responsibility. The notion of “co-producing” public safety implies an obligation on the part of the public to get involved, to work closely with their departments, and to feel a sense of shared ownership in the public safety of their neighborhoods.

Democratic Rules

Americans justly pride themselves in being a “government of laws.” This means that so far as possible, the actions of government officials are guided by rules and policies that are adopted before officials act, are transparent, and are formulated with input from the public. By giving communities a voice in making policy, democratic rulemaking improves the quality of government decisionmaking and lends greater legitimacy to the rules and policies that agencies adopt.

At present, police departments already operate with many rules. These are found in department manuals and standard operating procedures, as well as court decisions and directives from external oversight bodies. But the public rarely is involved in the formulation of these rules, and the rules themselves sometimes are not public.

Applying the principle of democratic rulemaking to policing would help to build trust and legitimacy between police departments and the communities they serve. By engaging in a more public and transparent policymaking process at the front end, police chiefs can preserve their ability to apply their hard-won expertise to policing, while securing greater buy-in for the rules their departments ultimately adopt.

Again, there are hard questions surrounding implementation. The need for secrecy is more acute in the policing context than elsewhere in government. Still, on many issues of public concern, from policing technology to the use of force, department policies can be made public and publicly debated without sacrificing public safety or putting officers at risk. It is important to draw clearer lines between what must be secret and what should be transparent.

Similarly, the public may lack the expertise to participate in a meaningful fashion regarding policing policy. Departments will need to find ways to educate the public about the mix of legal and practical considerations that influences the formulation of policy. Policies may also need to be simplified, for the sake of both the departments and the public.

Despite these and other challenges, democratic rulemaking around policing policies is the right ideal. And as with the other principles discussed here, national law enforcement organizations and academic research institutions can support departments’ efforts by evaluating potential models and disseminating information about what works.

Sound Metrics of Success

Departments should develop sound metrics of success that encompass all of the goals of policing. For too long, policing success has been defined almost exclusively by crime and arrest rates. It is necessary to also develop a set of metrics that capture the intangible aspects of policing, like equity and community trust.

Because metrics drive performance, developing these new metrics is essential both at the level of the individual officer, and for the department as a whole. For individual officers, it may mean shifting the emphasis from *outputs*—like stops and arrests—to *outcomes*, including public safety and community satisfaction. At the department level, police agencies should use community surveys and other feedback mechanisms to track community sentiment. Departments should also ensure—to the extent possible—that their policies and practices are based on sound, data-driven evaluation of their efficacy, including a weighing of the costs and benefits they entail. Although cost-benefit analysis is routinely used throughout executive government to evaluate policy, its use in the policing context presents particular challenges of quantification. Still, in order to develop sound practices, this is an important goal to pursue. ★

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Major Cities Chiefs Association

National Association for the Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement

National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives

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