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Eight Hours in the Shadow of a Police Officer

By

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Comments on police and community interaction often follow an incident resulting in a protest march, demands for the removal of a public office holder, for police to be arrested and other proposed actions. The focus is singularly on police and not the similar behavior of individuals who initiated the confrontation in the opening minutes of interaction. The hue and cry are not about finding sustainable solutions to long-standing problems; it is seeking some quick fix, the sustainability of which is elusive. There is always a larger story than what the media fixates on, and in ignoring it, a disservice is a result. For every encounter with adverse outcomes, the police have confronted someone or a group from the community with whom they are seeking interaction. The behaviors of individuals also contribute to the results of the encounter, and they must be included in the overall examination. Hindsight, including a variety of agendas, emotions, the inevitable "what if?" questions and many other variables fail to bring clarity to the event before the investigation is complete. The resolution is not possible. The combination of many contributing factors often directs what happens during the call for service.



The criticism of the police, handling an out-of-control individual, is often the source of confrontation and question. The behavior of the other person cannot be ignored as all related events are part of the same outcome. All calls for police service are complicated, few require a simple solution as emotions, philosophies, values and the intent of people present must be examined as part of the overall activity. It is hard to see why the media and other critics ignore the precipitating behavior that contributes to the confrontation in the first place.

The hypothesis of what happened, in the initial stages, often ignores relevant facts. Only facts, based on substantial investigation can lead to determining the cause and by extension implementation of sustainable solutions. To do less will weaken the argument, increase criticism and attack credibility. Using assumption or accusation not grounded in fact, evidence and analysis; we often see the smoke but not its source.

The premise is simple. If you do not violate the law, are a responsible person, do not run, challenge, and fight or attempt to harm or kill a police officer, who is doing his or her job, the outcomes will be much less complicated. When we resort to excuses for socially wrong and aberrant behavior; police action must take all known facts into consideration. The duality of cause and effect is real, and police are seeking to carry out

their sworn duty, react to what is known, observed, and circumstances of the moment. The alternative is to stand back and wait for the next phase of activity to occur, simultaneous to gathering additional facts. However, those in the field know that less than immediate response is also a cause for criticism. There is, it seems, no happy medium.

The media seemingly focused on the sensational story or breaking news will latch onto a story and give it continuous coverage. In that process, the lack of facts or full information may well contribute to a worsening of the situation. In today's world, social media allows instant communications, truthful, accurate or not! After the emotional outbursts, the tangle of people who are often incensed act based on the information at hand or driven by someone whose motivation is not openly expressed. All too often the outcome is destructive when it should not have been. After a thorough investigation by impartial and trained investigators, decisions are made and corrections implemented, if warranted, but with little accountability applied to those whose actions were also wrong and the original reason for police response in the first place.

The often quoted, "It takes a village to raise a child" is also true as "It takes a village to create a positive quality of life for all!"

A news media broadcast, short video, or "eye-witness" account often prematurely starts the race to judgment. Without facts, spontaneous demonstration, particularly when the property is damaged, stolen or destroyed and people injured, falls directly on those whose behavior created the harm. As reported, some individuals or groups are paid to demonstrate, and we do not expect fair and impartial views from them. The underlying issues with every police officer lay in the extremes that he or she must work within. The day may start helping someone resolve an issue, a stalled vehicle for example, and the exchange is pleasant, positive, and both parties are content in that relationship moment. No reason for anyone to become riled up. However, society is capable of all manner of threat, harm, and dangerous behaviors, which the police are sent to resolve, and the outcome, may well be different from anticipated. The following table illustrates examples common to a "routine" day for a police officer.

Dispatched Calls for Service - Police

POLICE	ALARMS	ASSAULT	B&E	BYLAWS	MVC	NOISE COMPLAINTS	THEFTS	POLICE ASSIST	TOTAL
JAN	25	5	6	1	30	2	17	43	129
FEB	26	16	6	2	27	6	23	45	151
MAR	32	8	5	8	15	13	24	48	153
APR	21	7	3	10	31	9	31	65	177
MAY	28	7	4	8	23	15	27	64	176
JUNE	20	15	6	4	38	24	26	69	202
JULY	32	11	8	14	40	22	29	82	238
AUG	27	11	7	12	39	24	42	64	226
SEPT	23	10	6	5	28	13	25	54	164
OCT	24	11	5	3	28	10	34	64	179
NOV	28	8	3	1	37	5	38	55	175
DEC	18	11	3	2	24	4	14	53	129
TOTAL	304	120	62	70	360	147	330	706	2099



<http://image.slidesharecdn.com/>

Call #1. The call is for a domestic violence situation. The officer arrives knowing this is potentially a serious call where historically officers have been injured or killed due to the emotionally charged environment. Police must ramp up their caution mode when responding to this type of call. They encounter one or more outraged people who do not want the police to be there. Threats made, and ultimately physical confrontation is unavoidable. The officer observes a woman bleeding; there are two young children huddled together in the corner of the room, hugging one another and crying out of fear. Moreover, now, another stranger is present, a police officer, who is addressing the adults and they do not understand why. Any rational person would find this situation intolerable. To think officers do not have emotions as well is to deny reality.

Community policing has little to do with anything at this point. The officer can reason, provide advice and tell an individual to calm down, but it may only incite their behavior. You cannot walk away; you have other parties present who may need help, and warning someone to manage their behavior is a waste of time. The outcome mandated by current law is the arrest of the aggressive party. Even that may result in a down and out fight to get the individual into secure custody. Stupid does not describe it!

Call #2. The next call is for an expired person, someone who died and the grieving family is there and does not know what to do. Consider the emotions present in that scenario and how you and I might act as a police officer. Police make other types of death notifications, none of which are easy or without resulting levels of grief and emotion.

Call #3. You stop a vehicle for speeding, and the operator is belligerent. You smell alcohol and ask the individual to step from the vehicle, all the while paying attention to others in the car. The driver refuses and is calling you all manner of the foul name. The

nearest backup unit is a minimum of ten minutes away. Suddenly the driver's door is shoved open, and the person gets out, is angry, shouting, and acting aggressively toward you. Moreover, there are the people still in the vehicle to be cautious about. You wonder, is anyone armed, wanted on a warrant, if a struggle breaks out will others in the car help resist the police, and what is the displayed threat level? Recall, you have only microseconds to process all of this and make decisions. The officer has every right to go home that day and not end up in the hospital or funeral home. He or she is doing their duty as an officer; the citizen is not!

Call #4. You cover a traffic accident where three of four members of a family are dead; killed by a drunk driver who crossed the center of the road and who is ranting about the damage to his truck while he paces in the road shouting invective's that would embarrass a Sailor. Meanwhile, the dead lie silent and the injured is your prime concern as she lingers between life and death. You feel helpless with the child's care due to the extent of her injuries, angry at the ranting drunk driver, a sense of helplessness that this ever happened, and other emotions all crowding in for dominance. People are gathering; traffic is tied up, the drunk increasingly angry; the crowd stands back and gawks but offers nothing to help. Occasionally that rare person steps forward in times of chaos and helps. For that action, the officer is eternally thankful. You silently hope the medics and other police arrive quickly, but they may not!

Call #5. You are called to a house by a neighbor concerned for an older adult they have not been able to contact and who should be at home. No one answers the door, and entry is made by forcing it open. Inside you find the elderly woman tied to a chair that has been placed near the kitchen stove, also the source of heat. She is bruised, weak, and tied to a chair for nearly a day. She understandably is confused and frightened. You learn that two young men broke in, assaulted her, took the money and some other items, tied her to the chair and placed her beside the hot stove. They left laughing!

Seldom is a police call for assistance an either or situation. Community policing is for rational people. The drunks, aggressive personalities, criminals, drug induced, mentally ill and other behavior triggers exist among us, and they are not rational when confronted. We expect the police officer ALWAYS to be a shining example of patience, friendliness, helpful, a problem solver and numerous other personalities the public wants to see. Often the officer has no choice of action. Law or policy dictate process, (e.g., domestic violence requires mandatory arrest) and no matter the outcome, some will disagree.

If we think more deeply about police work, other than a TV show, and consider what they do each and every day, what they are sent to handle, and the types of people they mostly encounter, it might result in new understanding. The surface brush provides no detail, no depth of fact to enhance understanding and does not give the individual more information to contemplate than their current lack of depth. The public is quick to criticize, but those elements of society that create the environment to which police respond, significantly contribute to outcomes. If you deal with social dysfunction day after day, you soon acquire an opinion that no one acts normal based on the calls you cover.

The legislative passing of a law and then self-congratulating without evaluation follow-up is callous behavior. Law and punishment alone will not solve deeper issues existing in society's dysfunctional and deviant personalities. Need proof, consider the War on Drugs, now some 44 years since President Nixon declared it and ask, is the problem better or worse?

Over the past four-plus decades, the United State has spent over **\$1 trillion** on this so called war. Incarcerated individuals have risen from 50,000 people jailed for drug violations to over 500,000 individuals. Moreover, we spend an estimated \$51 billion annually on illegal drug enforcement. This money amount is a drop in the bucket when the total cost is considered, the extent of crime, loss of work, taking from and not contributing to society, and resulting misery and death.



We lament, fuss and wring our hands over the drug issues and silently leave it to police and the criminal justice system to fix. As the above information states, the model is not working nor will it, for greater action and innovation is needed to find sustainable solutions.

Let's consider what the police encounter on a daily basis:

1. Alcohol or drug altered personalities.
2. Why people are angry, and out-of-control is often illusive.
3. Child abuse. Not the spanking, but where heat is applied to burn the skin, where welts are bleeding, swollen and black and blue. Perhaps broken bones, some unconscious and in danger of dying and some that are deceased.
4. Domestic violence abuse.
5. Violent people, who steal, rob, murder, and harm others and often inflict terrible injury.
6. Lying - seems no one can tell the truth and that leads to doubting everyone.
7. Abused individuals from children to adult, both genders (including physical, sexual and mental abuse).
8. Substantial instances where adults cannot manage for themselves and call the police.
 - a) "My 4-year-old child will not obey me!"
 - b) "My teenage child will not be in by midnight!"
 - c) "My neighbor makes noise after 8:00 pm and disturbs me!"
 - d) "My husband drinks his weekly paycheck."

9. Mutilated bodies, murdered children, and adults, the physical harm that would turn most stomach's, drunk and loud people shouting "F*#^ and get out of my house"; is not uncommon. Woe is the officer who finds this repulsive, whereas most of you are highly offended!

10. People who seek to harm or kill you must be recognized for personal safety.

11. Individuals who threaten your family, and not without some graphic description.

12. Murder and all manner of violence, and personal harm to others.

Now, you can say, just brush it off! A simple solution to manage someone with beer breath, bloodshot eyes, and hostile behavior, is always difficult. Most people never experience this form of assault. Okay, have you faced this situation and how do you think you might react? These are not a one-time occurrence; they may occur every shift that you work and over a twenty-five-year career, quite disheartening.

Twenty-five years of constant exposure to stress, adversity, and trauma takes a toll. To be pushed, punched, spit on, shot at, and the use of a weapon employed toward the officer is all too frequent. The same [stupid to deadly] behavior by people, who are out-of-control takes place all the time and if you are a police officer, a good share of them will fall on you. It exceeds what the critical public can only conceive but not realistically experience. Perhaps you should consider that as new solutions are considered, ones not couched in full facts are rejected as a quick fix. Concentrating on sustainable solutions is where time, effort and resources should be utilized.

It has an effect on the officer, and over time it can itself be harmful. We outfit our police with all manner of protective equipment, to keep their physical body safe from harm, but when we consider the psychological and emotional aspects, we are not doing enough, and necessary change is needed. Over time, the accumulating layers of stress, adversity, and trauma become harmful to the officer's psychological, physiological, emotional and social pathology. You cannot be exposed to every manner of human deviance, witness harm and death, be assaulted, threatened, and see significant human dysfunction for years on end and not have some residual damage occur.

I have written extensively on this topic, provided countless workshops and seminars, written a book on the subject of police stress and adversity and still we are far from providing officers the level of programs needed to help them keep their balance in a job where the world is often unbalanced.

So, before we string up the police, let's for once also include those members the dysfunctional public, the other side of the same situation and judge them too. For if people did not do the things they do, the police would not be required. Importantly, blaming only the police and not including those whose behavior, attitudes and action are co-joined in the same situation, represents half the story. Simplistic solutions do not work when we are dealing with human behaviors and attitudes. It takes a depth of

examination, factual information, research, discussion and collaboration to achieve sustainability.

Why are we incapable of learning that valuable lesson?