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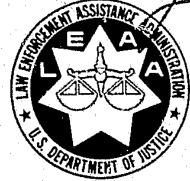

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSISTANCE ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20530

FOR RELEASE AT 7:00PM EST
TUESDAY, APRIL 13, 1976

Studying the Police

Address by Gerald M. Caplan, Director

National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

at the

Executive Forum on Upgrading the Police,

~~Washington Hilton Hotel~~

Washington, D.C., April 13, 1976

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I am honored to be part of the distinguished group that has gathered here to explore ways of upgrading the police.

In surveying the landscape of policing today and thinking about its future shape, it is instructive to look back at the past decade. Much has happened to the country and to the police.

My experience with police departments and police officials goes back only about ten years, when I was a staff attorney for the National Crime Commission in 1965. That year was the beginning of what turned out to be a long, difficult, productive period of change. Only a few years before, in the early sixties, it was accurate to see the police as a traditional hometown fixture, rarely discussed or scrutinized except perhaps during local election campaigns or in the wake of some dramatic crime or scandal. As our worries about crime mounted in the mid-sixties, this laissez-faire perspective rapidly gave way to what amounted to nearly a national preoccupation with police methods and performance.

From today's vantage point, it is easy to forget that it was only 12 years ago that crime first surfaced as a national issue, only 9 years back that it catapulted to first place in the public opinion polls as the most serious domestic concern -- where it remains, ahead even of unemployment and the high cost of living -- and only 8 years ago that it became the target of a multi-million dollar Federal program, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

As a prospective beneficiary of Federal funding, the police displayed what today seems like surprising coolness to Federal aid

when it first was offered under the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965. They did not see the program as a resource to help solve their problems. They were wary of studies and surveys and research in general. Being viewed by outsiders, even in the narrow context of examining grant performance, appeared unattractive. It could mean, for example, the opening of police departments to elected officials searching for relief from their own budgetary squeeze, and, worse, to community groups unsatisfied with police and performance. They had within recent years stopped downplaying crime and no longer felt their jobs were in jeopardy if crime statistics went up. With a few exceptions, the chiefs generally voiced the opinion that crime increases could be reversed by the police. The roadblock was seen as restrictive Supreme Court decisions, lenient trial judges, public apathy -- but not a lack of knowledge. There was little perceived need for experimentation.

None of the national police organizations called for financial aid and few police departments sought grants from public agencies or private foundations. In fact, the IACP at its 1965 convention responded negatively to the new law enforcement assistance program, passing a resolution against "any attempted encroachment by the Federal government into state or local government in the law enforcement field."

At the same time, however, another trend was creating a climate that would inevitably lead to change. The rising flow of public concern over crime began to exert pressure on law enforcement agencies, prompting a readiness to revise, experiment, and reform. The expanded Federal crime control effort provided for in the Safe Streets Act of 1968 was no longer a program in search of its constituency. Support for the legislation became widespread among law enforcement agencies.

Another mirror of the changes that have occurred is the work of the 1967 National Crime Commission and its successor the 1973 LEAA Commission on Standards and Goals. The National Crime Commission pounded away at the basics, recommending for the police such fundamentals as "stress ability in making promotions," "establish community relations units in departments serving substantial minority populations," and "employ a legal advisor." That it was necessary to urge police leaders to emphasize ability and education rather than seniority in selecting officials was a sign of those times. So are the many recommendations that are little more than pleas to develop and enunciate policy on important matters of common occurrence, for example, the decision to arrest, to interrogate, or to search.

What emerges from the Commission's work is a portrait of a law enforcement system that is, in its essentials, unsophisticated, lethargic, erratic, and inefficient.

Quite a different picture flows from the Standards and Goals Report of only six years later. Although authored by more conservative draftsmen, so many of the ideas of the National Crime Commission had won acceptance that the new Standards and Goals stressed more controversial and complex matters -- participatory management and suspect-oriented patrol, for example -- both significant departures from traditional ways.

It is clear that there has been great change in a relatively short period of time. The police have begun to shed an image, always much exaggerated, of inflexibility and resistance to change, and adopt riskier stances. The availability of major funding through LEAA has helped enormously to make the atmosphere more conducive to experimental programs.

One example comes to mind: the Family Crisis Intervention Unit, perhaps the most publicized demonstration project funded by LEAA's predecessor, the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance. Created in 1967, the two-year project was designed to reduce the number of injuries and deaths arising out of the handling of family disputes. Then as now, family fights were recognized as highly volatile, dangerous situations, often culminating

in violence both to family members and the police officers responding. Under the grant, 18 patrolmen were trained at the Psychological Center of the City College of New York City under the direction of Dr. Morton Bard, a practicing psychologist and former New York City policeman.

The announced results were impressive. During the project's first year and a half, no injuries of police officers occurred, and no charges of brutality were filed. Moreover, none of the more than 1,000 calls to which the unit responded ended in homicide or suicide.

Yet despite favorable press, praise from the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, and the availability of Federal funds to continue and expand the program, the New York City Police Department decided to discontinue the project. The reasons why are clouded, but the ironic fact is a program that clearly appeared to prevent crime and improve community relations died. It failed to muster sufficient allies to guarantee its existence for another year, even at no expense to the city. (The National Institute, in one of its first grants, did continue the effort, but with the New York City Housing Authority.)

As of 1971, no other police department had moved to imitate the New York experience. By 1973, however, approximately 16 police departments had formed embryo domestic disturbance units. After this sluggish start, acceptance of the concept of crisis intervention training appears to be steadily increasing, with more than 100 major departments now operating some form of crisis intervention.

To give impetus to the national trend and refine the original techniques, the Institute currently is supporting a $2.5 million demonstration program in six cities. The results to date are encouraging: overall, the rate of arrests related to family disturbances has declined, complaints against police have dropped, and citizen satisfaction has improved.

Today the process of change in the police world appears to be approaching a new threshold. Moving from almost complete disinterest to cautious, halting involvement, we now find an unprecedented receptivity to research.

Much credit belongs to the Police Foundation. Its landmark study of patrol in Kansas City opened up a major area of police operations to research and demonstrated that it is possible to conduct controlled experiments in police departments.

The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment raised major questions about the effectiveness of routine patrol. Similarly, research sponsored by the National Institute on response time suggests that the time spent on routine patrol can be used much more efficiently. This study, also in the Kansas City Police Department, is examining the traditional assumption that guides the allocation of patrol resources: that speedy police response is a critical factor in apprehending offenders.

A good deal of effort over the past several years has been expended on programs designed to decrease police response time.

This was a reaction to the conventional wisdom that held that the quicker the police response the more likely the apprehension of the criminal. In fact, it looks as if we asked the wrong question. The question should not have been "How long does it take the police to respond?" but rather "How long does it take the victim to report the crime?" Based on our preliminary findings, shaving seconds or even minutes from the average police response time will make little difference in the typical situation.

The problem of delay lies elsewhere. Many victims fail to report crimes immediately, and this delay dwarfs any delay in police response. For example, an assault is not reported to police until more than an hour after it has occurred, on the average, while the police car responds in a little more than three minutes. The average delay in reporting a robbery is nearly 23 minutes, but the police arrive at the scene within three and a half minutes after the car receives the call. Burglaries aren't reported for more than half an hour after they are discovered -- and perhaps hours after they are actually committed -- but the police officer responds to the dispatcher's call in six minutes. Nearly three quarters of an hour elapses before larcenies are reported, while the police are on the scene within five minutes after the call is received. Reports of auto theft are made 31 minutes after discovery; the police respond within five minutes of receipt of the dispatcher's call.

I emphasize that the findings are preliminary. If they are borne out when the project ends this summer, however, they should help to accelerate the rethinking of patrol that began with the Police Foundation research. If patrol does not prevent crime and if patrol officers are deployed for a quick response that may be irrelevant, then significant changes are obviously called for.

Another area where police resources can be <u>much</u> better utilized is criminal investigation. The Institute recently released the results of a two-year research project by the Rand Corporation that surveyed the investigative procedures of 153 police departments. As we expected, the study raised the ire of many as it punctured the TV image of the persevering, ingenious detective.

Basically, the study found that the capacity of even the best detectives to solve many crimes is extremely limited. In more than half the cases that are finally solved, the suspect's identity is known or readily determinable at the time the crime is reported to the police. Unless this information is given to the responding police officer, a detective is not likely to turn it up on his own. The researchers conclude that much of an investigator's time is spent on cases that are not likely to be solved, and they suggested that half the number of investigators could be eliminated or shifted to more productive uses without lessening effectiveness.

Obviously the nature of changes in the investigative process will vary from department to department, but it is apparent that the work of the detective need not be viewed as an art form that is not amenable to advanced management practices.

Similar findings have emerged from a Stanford Research Institute study conducted in Oakland, California. An analysis of four felonies -- robbery, rape, assault with a deadly weapon, and car theft -- showed that a large number of cases essentially "solve themselves" based on information given the responding officer. By the time a detective receives certain reports, only routine procedures need be followed to apprehend the suspect. The study also strongly suggests that the enormous investment in "M.O." files may be of questionable benefit. The great volume of information stored in the files may be counterproductive, making it difficult to extract significant characteristics. Like the rest of us, criminals are often inconsistent and unpredictable, and the likelihood of developing useful leads from "M.O." files appears slight.

These examples of current police research indicate deficiencies in police practices, the remedies for which are hard to find. They are perceived, quite accurately, as "bad news," the identification of serious problems without solutions at hand.

In exaggerated form, which is invariably the way complicated research findings get translated, the news becomes: detectives are ineffective, patrol doesn't work, prompt response to victims doesn't matter. In short, bad news, and bad news at an especially unhappy time, a time when those in charge -- whether parents or teachers,

political or religious leaders, judges or police chiefs -- are so under attack and have so little spirit and confidence for defense. A tough time made none the easier by critical research.

I sympathize with those on the receiving end, but I know of no alternative. These studies sting, but only for a while. Ultimately, they emancipate us. Knowing the limitations of the way we do things frees us, allows us to start experimenting. We remain limited in what we can do -- but not by tradition, not by the sum of distortions that gather about a subject and become the conventional wisdom of the day -- but only by our imagination. And that makes this an exciting time. What we have learned in the past decade is not that patrol or investigation or any other police practice is not as effective as we thought, but something far more substantial -- that responsible, imaginative, even daring, research can now be undertaken in police departments around the country; and that this research holds the promise of reshaping policing in America in profound ways, ways far more fitting for 1976 and beyond.

Perhaps the promise will be realized, perhaps not. I don't know. I do know that now we have the freedom to try and that is very good news.

Thank you.

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