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POLICE—COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Police Uniform: A Study of Change

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It is a matter of continuing conjecture whether the fashion in which someone dresses actually *changes* his behavior or whether it *reflects* his behavior; yet there is little doubt that dress is strongly linked in some positive manner to the behavior of the wearer. There are two ways to view this relationship. The first would assume that when an officer puts on the normal military-style police uniform, he or she modifies his or her self-image to correspond to the stereotypes associated with this uniform. This view would hold that the uniform actually causes behavior associated

with its stereotypes. The second position holds that those officers who do not feel their behavior to be in accord with the stereotypes of the uniform will not wear it—that over a period of time only those officers who are comfortable with the image created by their uniforms will remain in

the job. In either case, the assumption is that if you put a person in a different uniform, one that does not carry with it a century of stereotypes, the behavior of the officer and the perceptions of the citizens he protects will be modified.

Certainly the adoption of a new uniform is not a single act. It involves the changing of a deeply rooted set of

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values on the part of the police administration. The uniform change is in reality only the most obvious public symbol of this change of values. This complex process is well-documented in “A New Image for Campus Police,” an article by Floyd A. Mann featured in the February 1973 issue of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin. In this article, the change of uniform at the University of Alabama is discussed.

For the past 5 years, the officers at the University of Alabama have been uniformed in blazers and slacks. Though they are armed, the handgun is concealed and no leather and brass are in evidence. This uniform style has been in effect long enough that the students on campus now think of this as the “traditional” uniform for their university police. Few, if any, undergraduates remember a time when the police dressed other than they do now.

The University of Alabama seems unique in that it is one of the few communities in the country where the “new” look in police uniforms is not viewed as new. The uniform is no novelty in Tuscaloosa. Many of the officers and nearly all of the students think of it as “the way things always were.” No longer can differences in behavior and perceptions at the University of Alabama be attributed to the mere novelty of a new uniform. In fact, after 5 years, such changes should most certainly be attributed to the uniform and the policy changes it reflects.

A study was recently undertaken to determine the differences in perceptions this uniform elicited, both in those officers wearing it and the students who were in daily contact with them. For comparison purposes, the police and students at the University of Alabama and at nearby Auburn University were questioned. At Auburn officers wear an attractive traditional police uniform, while at Alabama the blazer and slacks uniform mentioned is the norm. Questionnaires were distributed to students and police at these two similar campuses.

Students used a form to report their perceptions of the trustworthiness, professionalism, objectivity, and dynamism of their particular police force. The officers at each school were asked to rank themselves on these same items, as well as filling out a scale which measured their self-image or personal concept. A sizable, representative population of students and police were contacted at both institutions.

Before discussing the findings of this research it is interesting to note that students and police at both institutions ranked their campus police forces as relatively high in all categories. Though the computerized analysis of the data did reflect differences, these differences were at the high end of the scales; that is, the differences reported do not indicate negative findings for one campus or the other, but rather a more positive set of attitudes at one institution. Students’ attitudes

and officers’ morale are high at both campuses, and the differences occur at the good-to-excellent end of the scale.

Students at Auburn viewed their police as quite trustworthy, while those at Alabama saw their officers as very highly trustworthy. This difference was statistically significant.

A similar difference existed in the students’ perception of professionalism. The Alabama students viewed their officers as being significantly more professional than the already positively ranked Auburn officers.

The students reported the opposite concerning the perceived dynamism of their respective officers. Auburn students perceived their officers as highly active and dynamic, while the Alabama students thought of their police as positively dynamic, but significantly less so than their Auburn counterparts.

The students ranked the Alabama officers as significantly more objective than the Auburn officers, though again both sets of perceptions were positive.

The perceptions of the officers at the two schools seemed to reflect belief that the officers, in spite of their uniforms, are indeed much the same at both universities. There were differences in professionalism and trustworthiness, with the Alabama officers seeing themselves as somewhat higher on these scales, but there were no significant differences in the objectivity, dynamism, or self-esteem variables.

These findings speak well for both campus police forces. Now, only a

few years after some of the most wrenching student unrest in our history, it seems that students hold positive attitudes about their police forces no matter what their uniform.

The data also reflect that officers have a healthy set of attitudes about their profession. The noted differences lead to speculation that police forces might increase community acceptance by altering their image with a less stereotyped uniform.

At least for campus forces it would seem evident that there are advantages to the adoption of a new uniform. This 5-year change in uniforms at Alabama has bolstered the image of the officers to the point that officers are now seen as *very* trustworthy, professional, and objective. The single reverse finding indicates a significant lowering of perceptions of dynamism or activity on the part of students. It is up to individual police administrators to determine whether this is a positive or negative change and to determine whether this lowering of perception of dynamism is worth the increase in the other three measures.

Police administrators should also consider that in this study nothing was lost in terms of the officer's self-esteem, his perceptions of his own dynamism and objectivity, and there was a significant increase in perceptions of trustworthiness and professionalism. It is quite possible that after 5 years of dealing with students who feel their police are highly trustworthy and professional, officers have un-

knowingly raised their own opinion of themselves. This could prove to be a valuable morale booster for campus police organizations.

Further research should be encouraged to determine whether specific uniform changes will bring about positive attitudes, and if so, what sort of changes are advisable. The data from Alabama and Auburn indicate that there is more to the power of a uniform change than the simple novelty of a new look—the changes have lasted too long for that.

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We should determine whether these changes are advisable, or even feasible, on the municipal level. Each of the campuses studied has a population larger than many municipalities, so the potential assets of a uniform change on the mass level should not be dismissed too quickly. There is the potential problem of officer visibility, and the need for instant recognition of the police uniform. These problems certainly deserve study.

Though it would be hasty to generalize immediately from this data to recommend a uniform change for all municipal police forces, one additional benefit of campus use should be considered. If this uniform change brings about a change of attitudes on

the part of students of college age, the long term effects could be gratifying. Our college populations are the physicians, clergymen, lawyers, and other professionals of tomorrow. Anything which would send these graduates to these positions of leadership with increased understanding and respect for law enforcement could have positive ramifications. If tomorrow's leaders could be brought to think positively about police the benefits should be inestimable to all.

The problem of where these changes began and will end is still perplexing. Certainly a new and different philosophy of law enforcement is necessary for a police administration to alter drastically its uniform. This will be most evident to the public in terms of the uniform itself, but changes in duties, regulations, and selection will certainly be part of this philosophical change. These changes lead the public (students in this case) to view the officer in a different light and to react to him more positively. The continued positive reactions from the public will lead the officer to alter perceptions of self and uniform and to become a different sort of officer than he or she previously was. These subtle changes in behavior will bring the officer very close to the philosophy advocated by the administration in its original guidelines. And so the process comes full circle. We could begin this positive, healthy cycle at any point, but at Alabama it all began with a change in uniform.



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