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POLICE WORK AND THE NEGRO

ELLIOTT M. RUDWICK

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Many police officials all over the country are attempting to lift law enforcement to the status of a profession. A few obvious signs of success are the increase in the qualifications for admission, expansion of recruit training and in-service educational programs, and the growth of the police science curriculum in many universities and colleges. But there can be no professionalization without the fair and intelligent enforcement of the law for all groups.

Recent studies indicate that some police officers still use and justify illegal violent methods in handling suspects and in making arrests. Such mistreatment is especially exercised against individuals in the lower socioeconomic groups, and particularly Negroes. Some law enforcement officers believe that colored people "will respond only to fear and rough treatment". According to one policeman, "If you don't treat them rough, they will sit right on top of your head."¹ In a Philadelphia study, Professor William Kephart reported that white patrolmen were likely to be more severe with Negroes than with whites. He discovered that those white officers who were "more strict" with colored suspects "tend to be the kind of patrolmen who object to riding with Negro partners, who object to taking orders from a qualified Negro commander, who believe that there are too many Negroes on the force, or who prefer not to have Negroes assigned to their district." Complicating the problem of police prejudice was the observation that Negroes, more frequently than whites, resisted arrest. However, such resistance was often related to the racial discrimination exhibited by white officers.²

In the face of brutality, Negroes can hardly be expected to maintain confidence in their local

law enforcement agency. Even isolated instances of unnecessary police violence are associated with the entire force and with police departments in general. This last observation is important, since our society is a highly mobile one with millions of people constantly moving from one city to another. Unfortunate experiences with the police in one community may result in hostile attitudes toward the police department in the city to which these persons move. Possibly this factor operated to some extent in affecting results of a recent survey of community attitudes toward the Los Angeles Police Department. Negro respondents were more critical than any others. For example, while 34.8% of the whites stated that the police "always respect the Constitutional rights of suspected criminals", only 12.1% of the Negroes agreed with the statement. While only 11.1% of the whites considered that the police were "often conscienceless and brutal in performing their duties", 38.2% of the Negroes expressed that view.³ Were these Negro respondents reacting to baseless rumors, past practices of the local police department, present performance of the local department, or actions of other law enforcement agencies? The answers to these questions were not provided in the Los Angeles study. Further investigations should certainly attempt to answer them. But one thing is certain—when large numbers of people lack confidence in their law enforcement agency, their full cooperation cannot be counted upon. Race prejudice and brutality damage the department at least as much as it endangers minority group victims.

Of course, there are many reasons why some officers use violence illegally.⁴ Police are frustrated in their dealings with a public which is sometimes contemptuous, critical, and hostile. Frequently,

¹ William A. Wesley, "Violence and the Police", *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 59, 1953-54, pp. 34-41.

² William M. Kephart, *Racial Factors and Urban Law Enforcement* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 106-107.

³ G. Douglas Gourley, *Public Relations and the Police* (Springfield, 1953), p. 75.

⁴ Wesley, *op. cit.*

patrolmen feel thwarted by a low occupational status which their communities ungratefully give them. Officers experience enormous pressures to apprehend certain types of suspects, and public opinion at times seems to condone the employment of brutal tactics in solving some crimes. In many cities, law enforcement officers are less likely to be reprimanded for beating up Negroes and others of low social status. Where race prejudices are commonplace, it is not unusual that policemen manifest them as much as the general public. But truly professional law enforcement officers, above all others, recognize that under our system of government, a man is innocent until proven guilty. Constitutional safeguards place definite limitations upon the use of police authority. The courts, not the police, have the responsibility to determine guilt and appropriate punishments. Police may exercise force only when physically attacked and/or when arrests are resisted. When more force than necessary is employed, law enforcement officers become law-breaking officers.

Able police administrators do protect citizens against illegal violence at the hands of irresponsible law enforcement officers. For example, in response to unsatisfactory public relations, Cincinnati's Chief Stanley R. Schrotel issued a "Use of Force" directive. Under this order, persons who are struck by police are taken to the station house (with any witnesses) and examined as soon as possible. A report is sent to headquarters and a copy is filed in the officer's service record. Upon determination of the facts, appropriate action is promptly taken. The patrolman may be exonerated. Or perhaps his hostilities are uncontrollable, and he had used excessive force more than once. Possibly retraining proved useless and in such a case, separation from the force may be indicated. The Cincinnati approach protects both the police and the public.⁵

Progressive administrators recognize that policemen who believe Negroes are inherently stupid or lawless may cause trouble for themselves and the force. Law enforcement leaders have tried to do something about reeducating the attitudes of their men regarding racial groups. Unfortunately, such training can only be brief and elemental since it must be fitted into an already overloaded recruit course. But even with time limitations, recruits can be taught about the myths of racial inferiority,

the relationship between frustrations and prejudice, and the causes of racism. While such teachings may lessen a man's prejudices or leave them unaffected, recruits should certainly be indoctrinated to control and exclude racial attitudes from official actions.

In recruit training schools, various cities use short but informative lesson plans to combat racism. New York City has a unit entitled "Racial Prejudices and Common Sense".⁶ Chicago's unit treats the backgrounds of racial problems and discusses, among other things, "social situations in which racial tensions arise"—such as the city's employment pattern, residential segregation, and recreation.⁷ For many years, the Chicago Park Police and the Louisville Police Department have drawn upon the excellent material compiled by sociologist Joseph D. Lohman.⁸ Both of these law enforcement agencies have sponsored the publication of concise, authoritative volumes which should be in every police library and available for the use of instructors and recruits as well as in-service personnel.

Some communities around the country are holding one or two day "Community Relations Institutes" and police programs on "Human Relations and Minority Group Problems". Many of these are sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. These institutes frequently have the support of local newspapers (both white and colored), labor unions, interracial associations, and Negro organizations. The programs represent a move in the right direction, and no small amount of time, effort, and money have been expended on them. However, there may be some questions concerning their actual effectiveness. Perhaps too much time may be given to preachment and exhortation, and little time set aside for objective study of problems and in making provisions for police planning. Frequently, the people who attend are police officers in the "top categories" and "selected sergeants". More patrolmen should be present at these institutes. It must be remembered that such projects can only be the first step in the development of a worthwhile human relations approach within police departments.

⁶ "Racial Prejudice and Common Sense", New York City Police Department Recruits' Training School, Lesson File Code IV C 1, 1957.

⁷ "Outline of Human Relations—The Police and Minority Groups", Chicago Police Department n.d.

⁸ Joseph D. Lohman, *The Police and Minority Groups* (Chicago, 1947); Lohman, *Principles of Police Work With Minority Groups* (Louisville, 1950).

⁵ Stanley R. Schrotel, "Supervising the Use of Police Authority", *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science*, Volume 47, 1956-57, pp. 589-592.

Police recruits should also know how to deal with the racial tensions of the public, since hostile attitudes often lead to conflicts and mob violence. Our country is in the midst of tremendous and rapid social change; extremist actions (such as the dynamiting of homes, churches, and synagogues) have threatened law and order. Police must play a leading role in preventing and containing violence, since unchecked acts may pave the way for full-scale race riots. Unfortunately, some police departments have not displayed great success in handling race riots of previous decades. For example, an examination of the famed Chicago riot of 1919 and the Detroit riot of 1943 reveals some egregious errors.⁹

1. Refusal to arrest whites on Negro complaints, thus demonstrating that police were enforcing a white man's law;
2. The cavalier arrest of Negroes, both in the early and later stages of the riots;
3. The dispatch of insufficient numbers of police into the conflict areas;
4. Inadequate training in riot control.

On the other hand, law enforcement agencies have also demonstrated intelligence and fairness in handling other large-scale racial disturbances. For example, the New York Police Department acted commendably in controlling the Harlem race riot of 1943. This disturbance was touched off by an argument between a white policeman and a Negro soldier. While both required hospital attention, the local Negroes believed that the soldier had died, and they began massing. Immediately, the mayor and police commissioner directed operations from the Harlem police station. Large numbers of police officers (including Negro patrolmen) were dispatched to the area. In addition, auxiliary forces and national guard units were alerted. All were under explicit orders to employ only as much force as clearly required—and no more. Law enforcement personnel were told to be vigorous but “impersonal” and “diplomatic” in dispersing crowds and mobs. Large groups were divided into smaller ones and were scattered. Simultaneously, governmental and police administrators requested and secured the cooperation of Negro community leaders, who broadcast to the people and headed off rumors. Although some personal injuries were sustained and property destroyed, the crowds were

broken up completely by the following morning. The police established a temporary curfew in the community and made themselves available to prevent further trouble.¹⁰

Intelligent police work has probably prevented many other race riots. In 1943, a Washington organization of Negroes demanded that colored people be hired to run busses and street cars. They prepared to stage a parade and public meeting to publicize their cause. Rumors of impending violence filtered into police headquarters, and the commissioner was asked by many citizens to prevent the colored people from having the parade. The commissioner believed that the Negro group wanted only to present a non-violent protest, and he maintained that serious racial tensions would result from blocking the demonstration. He marched in the parade and large numbers of officers were assigned to maintain order. Washington had no racial violence that day and rumors of a riot evaporated. As a result of the commissioner's action, Negroes recognized that they would receive police support when their rights were jeopardized. The whites discovered that in an atmosphere of tension, false tales were believed and passed along as truth.¹¹

Profiting from experiences of the past, police administrators have discovered a great deal about handling racial disputes, and when this knowledge is shared with police recruits (as well as in-service personnel), these men are better prepared for situations which might be encountered. For example, when a white officer attempts to settle an argument between a Negro and a white, he should expect to be asked to uphold the position of the white disputant. If the dispute cannot be settled fairly and quickly, the officer should request that both sides accompany him to the station and file complaints against each other. This action avoids the involvement of bystanders. Sometimes policemen arrive at the scene when a mob has already formed and emotionality is in high gear. The crowd may refuse to scatter, and the police may be compelled to “remove the most excited” persons. In this situation, law enforcement officers must show that they possess power, and of course it is the demonstration of force which often makes its actual use unnecessary.

Alert officers have learned to keep an ear cocked

⁹ Leonard Broom and Philip Selznick, *Sociology* (Evanston, 1956), pp. 265-272. Alfred M. Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot* (New York, 1943).

¹⁰ *Municipal Police Administration*, 3rd edition, (Chicago, 1950), pp. 427-428.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 426-427.

for rumors which are both symptoms and causes of racial tensions. In past disturbances, these rumors (and many others) were heard:

1. Shove and push day—supposed to be a weekly affair in which Negroes unite to shove whites in stores and on the streets;
2. Rape rumors;
3. "The Negroes are arming" rumors.

Lohman has suggested "A Plan of Action" for law enforcement agencies, and its utilization can prevent and control serious racial disturbances:¹²

1. The prompt reporting of all race tension incidents, from which headquarters could construct a barometer based upon the spot mapping of altercations, rumors, etc.;
2. The adoption and rehearsal of plans for rapid mobilization;
3. Pre-arranged agreements with state police providing for line support upon request;

¹² Lohman, *The Police and Minority Groups*, pp. 105-107.

4. Planning and practicing cordon tactics sealing off particular areas;
5. Deployment of both Negro and white patrolmen, thus stressing the "neutral" role of law enforcement agencies;
6. Organized efforts by administrators to gain the support of community leaders of both races, who should participate in calming crowds—if riot situations do break out;
7. The adoption of a skilled public relations program designed to interpret the police department to the community via Negro and white newspapers.

It is the responsibility of law enforcement officers to safeguard the rights of all individuals in the community. This task demands the exercise of fairness and impartiality, as well as some understanding of the field of human relations. These requirements are among the basics for the establishment of a professional police service.