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LEPSL 500

Module 3 Assignment

Ethics, Race Relations, & Law Enforcement

University of San Diego

Professor Erik Fritsvold

21 September 2020

“The Speech at USD”

FBI Director Delivers Brilliant Speech
Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for inviting me to speak at the University of San Diego School of Law. I want to share some thoughts and ideas about the relationships between law enforcement and the diverse communities we serve. As we all know, healthy relationships are built on trust and mutual respect. Unfortunately, after our country was founded, police enforced explicitly racist laws focused on the African American people, which strained relationships from the start. Recently, law enforcement has been at the forefront of enforcing policies in the war on crime and drugs that have culminated in massive racial disparities—in police stops, use of force, arrests, and just about every other aspect of the criminal justice system (Lopez, 2020).

Over the past decade, there have been several high-profile deaths of unarmed African American men by white law enforcement officers. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in Staten Island, and the most recent death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd presumably died of asphyxiation due to a white officer kneeling on his neck for nearly nine minutes (Alexander, 2020). Protests and riots followed Floyd’s death. I condemn the officer's actions, along with the inaction of the officers who stood by watching. They have all been arrested and need to be held accountable. “I also condemn the riots because I see absolutely nothing to be gained by them. In fact, with more and more focus being given to the riots, the destruction of property, and the pending deployment of the National Guard, these actions has devalued Floyd’s death” (Borelli, 2020).

Understanding biased based behaviors is vital because there is a distinction between explicit and implicit attitudes. Explicit biases are described as attitudes and beliefs that are conscious and intentional. In contrast, implicit biases are often described as subtle responses that are not necessarily conscious thoughts, more of a gut reaction based on pre-programming from
experiences, TV, movies, etc. No one in society is exempt from implicit bias behavior. Our police especially should monitor their reactions in an attempt to discern if they somehow react differently when interacting with whites compared to blacks.

“Racial bias isn’t an epidemic in law enforcement any more than it is an epidemic in academia or the arts” (Comey, 2015). The overwhelming amount of people who are in law enforcement chose to risk their lives to help others. “They did not sign up to just help white people, or black people, or Hispanic people, or Asian people, they signed up to help all people” (Comey, 2015).

Now, the truth be told, many of America's impoverished black communities are riddled with drugs, gangs, and the violence associated with that lifestyle. These disadvantaged communities experience unemployment rates three times higher than the national average (The Guardian). The young men who grow up in these environments lack role models, adequate education, and have less hope than middle-class Americans. As a result, these communities experience an intensive law enforcement presence, where high rates of arrest and incarceration are a reality for many of the residents. The more police encounters, the increased likelihood of a use of force or critical incident. According to the Harvard School of Public Health, “Blacks are three times more likely than whites to get killed during a police encounter” (Harvard, 2020).

Many questions arise about the effectiveness of law enforcement's aggressive policing tactics and the criminal justice system's equity. Perhaps not surprisingly, areas with high mistrust levels tend to be heavily policed, where police use tactics such as pretextual stops of black men. These practices have damaged law enforcement's relationships with the people they are sworn to protect. “Public trust in law enforcement, a critical ingredient in public safety is tenuous at best” (La Vigne, 2017).
“Those of us in law enforcement must redouble our efforts to resist bias and prejudice. We must better understand the people we serve and protect—by trying to know, deep in our gut, what it feels like to be a law-abiding young black man walking on the street and encountering law enforcement. We must understand how that young man may see us” (Comey, 2015). If people of color and law enforcement could see through each other’s lenses, there would be a better sense of understanding, which would lead to mutual respect and trust.

How can we untrain the biases that law enforcement has developed in the impoverished crime-ridden black communities? How are we going to untrain the biases the black community has of the police? There are no easy answers to these questions. However, I think the first thing we must do is “get out of our police cars and begin building stronger relationships within the communities we patrol” (Comey, 2015). It becomes much harder to hate being up close and personal. Positive relationships lead to trust. We need to dissolve the “Us vs. Them” attitude, so that WE can all become a community.

It is also vital that we change how we hire, train, and measure law enforcement. Law enforcement needs to reflect the diverse communities we are policing. We can accomplish this by developing people’s interest in law enforcement at a young age through mentorship programs and law enforcement courses. We also need the citizens to better understand our jobs and the inherent risk we face daily. This can be accomplished through citizen academies.

In conclusion, a law enforcement officer’s obligation is to lean into these difficulties and not ignore or run from them. Each officer can make small strides towards eliminating biased-based policing. As a result, the tide of equality will rise. I leave you with my final thought, which is a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “We may have all come on different ships, but we are on the same boat now.” Thank you!
References:


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