

Why Do Officers Succeed?



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POLICING IS A HUMAN ENDEAVOR, and for that reason alone, it occasionally yields catastrophic consequences. Nearly two centuries have passed since Sir Robert Peel founded the Western world's first organized police service, the Metropolitan Police of London, but law enforcement still struggles to devise strategies that foster the order and tranquility community members deserve without at least occasionally garnering criticism or backlash.

This unending quest is certainly not for a lack of sophistication. Automation has long supplanted old-fashioned card files and pin maps. Analysts at their computers and officers in the field can readily scour vast repositories of data and produce textual and graphical output, often at a moment's notice. Deployment of personnel is facilitated by tools that use current and historical incident data to identify persons and places in need of attention.

In that sense, it really *is* a brave new world. In another sense, not so much. Computers can't control the uncertainties of the environment—or the quirks of neighborhoods—or of their inhabitants—or, alas, of the well-intended yet imperfect officers who are sent in to keep the peace. No matter how much agencies train or how closely leaders supervise, tragedies happen. These misfortunes occur far more often in the economically deprived, at-risk places often selected for enhanced policing.

Officers know that the socioeconomic dilemmas that lie at the root of crime and disorder are beyond their power to solve. But, as violence threatens to consume neighborhoods, they can't just stand idly by. Are there ways to vigorously respond without creating needless offense? Academics have stepped in with a structured approach that probes poor law enforcement outcomes and devises solutions. These inquiries, though, have been relatively few, and their effectiveness can be impaired by the reluctance of key participants to accurately depict what took place.

But there is a far less conflicted way to promote quality policing. Officers are frequently involved in encounters that, had they not been

adroitly handled, would have likely turned out poorly. They regularly meet substantial challenges when gathering evidence of serious crimes. These obstacles and others are overcome almost as a matter of course. Imagine the potential benefits to the practice of policing should we probe these happy outcomes to find out why officers succeed.

This is absolutely within range. While most police triumphs remain “under the radar,” fleshing them out is a straightforward task that could be accomplished through interviews. Officers could be asked to describe recent episodes of fieldwork whose outcomes they found especially gratifying. Examples might range from the seemingly mundane, such as gaining critical information from a hostile resident, to the more noteworthy, say, peacefully and safely taking a dangerous and combative suspect into custody. To learn how these successes came about, officers would be asked to identify the factors they believe helped produce such good results. Comments could be solicited in two areas: (1) officer attributes such as experience, temperament, risk tolerance, and facility with non-lethal weapons, and (2) extrinsic variables including quantity and quality of information; conduct of suspects, witnesses, and bystanders; and the presence of other officers and specialized teams.

Many years ago, the author conducted taped, at-length interviews with narcotics detectives in several agencies to probe their views about production and craftsmanship. Officers were promised anonymity, and their heartfelt responses confirmed that they took that assurance to heart. A like approach could be used here. A college or university criminal justice program could be asked to develop a protocol, conduct interviews, and analyze the results. Their findings could be used to stimulate dialogue about quality policing and the paths to that end.

In these uncertain times, it's absolutely vital that police do a good job. Fortunately, most officers already know how to get there. All we need to do is ask. ♡