

Police: Organization and Management

Variation in Style and Structure

Until the early 1960s, American policing was a "closed" institution. State and federal politicians did not routinely run for elective office on platforms related to crime and policing. The average American citizen probably had little knowledge of what police work entailed. Courts did not devote much energy toward scrutiny of the police. In all, policing remained closed to the eyes and ears of the public and their representatives.

Several circumstances in the 1960s converged to open up American policing to external audiences. Police use of force and discriminatory treatment of minority citizens became a prominent theme during protests over civil rights and the war in Vietnam. Several of the riots that engulfed American cities occurred in the aftermath of police actions such as shootings, traffic stops, or raids (Walker). Classic news stories of the era captured images of police officers using excessive force against citizens. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) found that "deep hostility between police and ghetto communities" was a primary determinant of the urban riots that it studied. The U.S. Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Earl Warren, began to closely scrutinize the activities of the police. In several landmark cases, the Court restricted the powers of the police to conduct searches (e.g., *Mapp v. Ohio*, 367 U.S. 643 (1961)), obtain confessions (e.g., *Miranda v. Arizona*, 384 U.S. 436 (1966)), or prevent detainees from consulting with an attorney (e.g., *Escobedo v. Illinois*, 378 U.S. 478 (1964)). Finally, rising crime rates during the 1960s also began to cast doubts on the effectiveness of the police. From 1968 to 1971, three national commissions recommended sweeping reforms of the American police: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, and the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice.

Research since the early 1970s has shown that police officers have a great deal of discretion in their day-to-day work. They must regularly make decisions about conducting searches, making arrests, using force, stopping vehicles, issuing warnings, and many other discretionary activities in which police engage daily. While the criminal law structures some of the decisions that police officers make, it does not, in most cases, dictate what they must do. Therefore, police officers are frequently left to their own devices in making decisions. Since the 1960s, however, several controls have been instituted to reduce the amount of discretion that police officers must make certain decisions. For instance, many agencies have formal written policies governing the conditions under which police officers can pursue a fleeing vehicle or use deadly force against a suspect. Some state legislatures and police agencies have instituted statutes or policies that require police officers to make an arrest when they see evidence of domestic violence. Despite these types of controls, the conditions under which police officers do their work make it difficult to curtail their discretion very much. If they continue to work alone in low-visibility settings in the absence of direct supervision, police officers will need to rely on some degree of discretionary decision-making.

Because they have so much discretion, police officers develop different styles of policing. Some are aggressive, busily making arrests, stopping vehicles, and seeking out offenders. Others prefer a more laid-back approach, counseling juveniles and issuing warnings rather than making arrests whenever possible. Even when police agencies try to constrain discretion by declaring "zero-tolerance" policies for offenses such as drug possession, officers sometimes prefer not to make an arrest in certain situations. The notion that a police officer develops his or her own "working personality" is in stark contrast to the image of a police officer as an automaton, responding impartially to every situation according to the letter of the law.

In 1968, James Q. Wilson observed patterns of discretionary behavior in eight police departments. He found that police organizations, like the individuals within them, also tend to develop unique styles of policing. Wilson developed a taxonomy to describe three prominent styles of policing that he observed: legalistic, service, and watchman. In legalistic-style departments, officers initiate formal contact with citizens and structure their work according to the criminal law. For many years, the Los Angeles Police Department was regarded as the prototypical legalistic police agency, with its reputation for neatly pressed uniforms and the "just the facts, ma'am" reputation popularized by Sergeant Joe Friday on the television series *Dragnet*. In service-style departments, officers initiate informal contact with citizens and rely less on the criminal law. In watchman-style departments, officers neither initiate contact with citizens as frequently, nor rely as much on the criminal law.

Wilson argued that the social and political environment in which a police organization is situated influences the style of policing that it adopts. Cities adopting the legalistic style tend to have more heterogeneous (mixed) populations and professionalized, nonpartisan, "good governments" (exemplified by the city manager form of government). Service-style departments tend to be located in cities with more homogeneous populations and professional, nonpartisan governments. Cities with watchman-style departments tend to have more heterogeneous populations and a more partisan political tradition (exemplified by the mayor-council form of government).

Police agencies are not only defined by their styles, but also by their structures. According to Robert Langworthy, structure is "the framework on which a police organization arranges its resources to conduct its activities" (p. 17). The following seven elements are the core dimensions of a police organization's structure (adapted from Langworthy and from Maguire):

1. *Vertical Differentiation*: The nature of the hierarchy, including the number of command layers and the social distance between layers.
2. *Occupational Differentiation*: The extent to which the organization relies on employees with specialized occupational skills.
3. *Functional Differentiation*: The degree to which the organization divides its work into specialized functions. Nearly all police agencies have separate divisions for patrol, investigations, and administration. The further they divide these divisions into more specialized subunits, the more functionally differentiated they are.

4. *Spatial Differentiation*: The spread of the organization within its jurisdiction. Police agencies with a single headquarters facility are less spatially differentiated than those with precinct houses, substations, and other offices located within neighborhoods.
5. *Administrative Intensity*: The proportion of employees assigned to administrative support functions (like human resources or computing) as opposed to core tasks such as patrol or investigations.
6. *Formalization*: The extent to which an organization relies on formal written policies and procedures rather than informal guidelines such as tradition or friendship.
7. *Centralization*: The extent to which decisions within an organization are concentrated at the top of the hierarchy.

Police organizations adopt different structural configurations. Some have up to twelve levels of command, while others have as few as four. Some are centralized, with decisions flowing down from the chief's office, while others are more decentralized, with decisions flowing up from patrol officers.

For much of the 1990s, police reformers debated the best ways to structure a police organization. Following trends in the private sector, police management textbooks for much of the twentieth century urged police executives to adopt formalized, centralized, specialized, and hierarchical structures. Community policing seeks to reverse this trend, urging decentralized, less hierarchical, more generalized, and less formal structures. Research has shown that police organizations are changing their structures slowly, but not as radically as urged by community policing reformers. Nevertheless, there is a small but growing trend among police agencies to reject traditional structures.

Reference: Police Organization and Management (n.d.). Police Organization and Management retrieved August 30, 2020. <https://law.jrank.org/pages/1669/Police-Organization-Management-Variation-in-style-structure.html>