POLICE IN A LARGE SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN COMMUNITY

John C. H. Oh

ABSTRACT

This is a study of the local law enforcement personnel, who not only possess but often exercise a great deal of discretionary power in the course of administering the laws and ordinances in their local communities. Their general attitudes and the manner of contacting with the public have very important consequences upon the society. Yet, we know very little about these people.

The present study is based on the analysis of the survey questionnaires returned by police officers of a large southeastern Wisconsin community. It was designed to answer the following three questions:

1. How the police officers felt about the role of the Supreme Court in the criminal justice system in American society, particularly in regard to some of the recent Court decisions dealing with the constitutional rights of the suspect—in the area of criminal law and procedures;

2. How they felt about the law and order—their general attitudes toward violence, civil rights, and social order;

3. And, how they felt about themselves—their general attitudes toward their work and status in the community.

The study shows that police officers generally have a very low regard toward the U. S. Supreme Court, that the majority of police officers tend to develop an inferiority complex in their work (because they believe that the public does not extend due recognition to the police officers), and that they are excessively protective of their own work and quite unreceptive to any kind of criticism toward the police officers everywhere. It must be cautioned that these findings are only preliminary and suggestive; however, any concerned reader cannot help but to conclude that it is an urgent national task to intensify our efforts to train the police officers with the ideals of democracy and constitutionalism either through in-service or out-service training, or both.
INTRODUCTION

In recent years social scientists have made some significant contributions to the understanding of two related questions concerning the community power structure—"where power lies" and "who makes decisions" in the political communities. Consequently, we probably know more about the "men at the top" at both governmental and non-governmental levels in various political communities than ever before.\(^1\) On the other hand, we know very little about the middle and/or lower level of the governmental personnel, because the same social scientists have generally shunned conducting any systematic studies on them. One such area of neglect is the local law enforcement personnel. These people—whether they are called constables or sheriffs or police officers—not only possess but often exercise a great deal of discretionary power in the course of administering the laws and ordinances in their local communities. Their general attitudes and their manner of contact with the public have very important consequences for the society.

The present study is based on the analysis of the survey questionnaires returned by 55 of 73 police officers of the Waukesha Police Department during the period of October 14–21, 1968. A brief description of the community being surveyed is in order. Waukesha has experienced one of the most rapid population increases among Wisconsin's cities and is a city of 36,339 people according to a special census of 1966, as compared to 30,004 in 1960 and 21,233 in 1951. (Waukesha County, which is seated in the city, had an increase of 326.5% during the period 1910–60, which was the fastest population growth rate among the state's 70 counties.) The city was the fourth largest in the Greater Milwaukee Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area,\(^2\) which in 1968 contained an estimated population of 1,458,100, of which only 83,931 (or 5.8%) were Negro. The city itself had only a dozen or so Negro families, since the bulk of the Negro population in the area resided in the central city (Milwaukee). It must be noted, however, that the city is not a suburb of the central city in the strictest sense, because it is a booming industrial community on its own with a number of nationally-known manufacturing firms (i.e. It had some 23 banking and savings and loan associations with total assets of over $150 million at the end of 1966).\(^3\)


\(^2\) The area covers at least 33 separate governmental units which include four counties, 15 cities, 15 villages, and four towns.

Politically, Waukesha residents have generally voted for Republican candidates. In the latest election they again voted heavily Republican for the presidency, the state-wide ticket (for the governor and four other constitutional officers), the state assemblyman, the state senator, and for the U. S. congresswoman. The only Democrat who received the plurality of votes in the city was an independent-minded, popular U. S. senator.

As far as the incidence of crime is concerned, it was reported that Waukesha had a total crime index of only 295 in 1967, which was not only far below the national average of similar size cities but also lower than the state average of 1,121.1 and that of the Milwaukee SMSA's 1,613.2. This lower crime incidence may be partially due to the fact that Waukesha's full-time police employee rate of 1.8 was far in excess of an average number of officers per 1,000 inhabitants for the same size communities in the state and the nation as a whole.4

The present study was designed to answer the following three questions:

1. how the police officers felt about the role of the Supreme Court in the criminal justice system in American society, particularly in regard to some of the recent Court decisions dealing with the constitutional rights of the suspect in the area of criminal law and procedures;
2. how they felt about law and order—their general attitudes toward violence, civil rights, and social order;
3. and, how they felt about themselves—their general attitudes toward their work and status in the community.

We felt that October, 1968, was the most opportune time for this type of study because many of the questions used in the survey were the same kind of issues raised by the various candidates in their election campaigns. Our actual subjects included 37 uniformed patrolmen and 18 detectives and police executives. The data in Table 1 show that there were some marked differences between these two groups of officers, in that patrolmen were in general younger (51% under age 30 compared to only one of 18 detectives in that age group), better educated (38% to 17% for some college work), and less experienced in police work (an average of six years service for the former as compared to 18 years for the latter) than detectives and executives.

### Table 1. Age and Education of Police Officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>All Police Officers* (Number: 55)</th>
<th>Uniformed Patrolmen (Number: 37) Educational Background</th>
<th>Detectives and Executives (Number: 18) Educational Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (35)</td>
<td>Some H. S. (22)</td>
<td>Some H. S. (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 21-30</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 31-40</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 41-50</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 51</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All officers educational backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some H. S.</th>
<th>H. S.</th>
<th>Some College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(35)</td>
<td>(17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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ON THE SUPREME COURT AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Our study shows that police officers generally have a very low regard for the U. S. Supreme Court, to such an extent that the very legitimacy of the highest court is being questioned. Almost unanimously (93%), they felt that the Court in its recent decisions dealing with criminal law and procedures has reduced sharply the effectiveness of the police. However, it was found that such general negative attitudes toward the Court did not prevail consistently when we asked them a series of questions concerning their particular attitudes toward several selected court decisions which dealt with the constitutional rights of the suspect. They were specifically asked about these five decisions of the Court: Miranda vs. Arizona (1966); Mapp vs. Ohio (1961); Mallory vs. U. S. (1957); Gideon vs. Wainwright (1963); and Escobedo vs. Illinois (1964). (In asking their reactions to these cases, we described the essence of the decisions and elicited their reactions, instead of by the official legal citations.)

First, as to their reactions to the Miranda decision, we asked the police officers whether the Court ruling that requires them to inform a suspect of his constitutional rights before questioning him interfered with their performance of duties. The data show that a great majority of detectives and executives (72%) who must question the suspect in the course of their investigatory work felt that it interfered with their work, while only 22% felt it did not. The uniformed patrolmen were almost divided evenly. This change of attitude (from their general negative attitude toward the Court) is very significant in view of the fact that the Miranda decision was the most comprehensive requirement laid down by the Court to protect the constitutional rights of the suspect from being infringed upon by the law enforcement officials.

Surprisingly, in the next three cases we find that there were more police officers agreeing with Court opinions than disagreeing. In the Mapp decision, 49% agreed with the Court that evidence obtained by illegal searches and seizures cannot be introduced into a state court, while 47% opposed it. In the case of the Mallory decision, only 71% felt that the Court decision (requiring a prompt arraignment of the suspect) is a reasonable one, but 80% stated that it did not interfere with their work in any way. The overwhelming majority (82%) also said that they agreed with the Gideon decision (which requires a state to provide free counsel for defendants who cannot afford a lawyer).

*Additional statistical supporting data are deleted throughout the paper. They are, however, available from the author upon request.
The police officers in general find the Escobedo decision most objectionable. The Court in 1964 ruled in this case that a defendant has a right to have his lawyer with him when he is being questioned by police officers. Seventy-one per cent of the respondents (83% of the detectives and executives and 65% of the uniformed patrolmen) indicated that this decision interfered with their investigative work. Altogether 56% of the officers felt that it was a bad decision. It must be emphasized that what they objected to most was not that the defendants should be given free counsel to defend themselves but that the Court ruling that permits the presence of a lawyer at the time of their questioning of the suspects. In this sense, the Escobedo case is the main cause of the Supreme Court’s unpopularity among the police officers.

On Social Order, Violence and Civil Rights

Our study shows that police officers are generally conservative toward issues such as social order, violence and civil rights. We first asked them the following open-ended question: “There is much discussion over the police action that took place during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Please indicate how you feel about the incident, including whether or not you feel that the Chicago police over-reacted in the situation.” Almost all the respondents (95%) felt not only that the Chicago police did not over-react in the controversial incident but also that what they did was proper because, as one officer indicated, “the demonstrators were forewarned and if they didn’t want to get hurt they should not have been there.” Not one officer said that the Chicago police should have handled the situation differently—in direct contrast to the findings of the Walker Report. Even with Chicago Mayor Daley’s very controversial order “to shoot to kill the looters” (as reported by the mass media during the disturbances), only 11% indicate that they did not agree with the mayor.

When asked “How do you feel about alleged police brutality?” 83% of the officers claimed that not only does it not exist but such a charge is part of a conspiracy to undermine the police throughout the country. In reply to another question on civil disorders in our cities and college campuses, 96% of the officers stated that maximum (rather than minimum) force should be used in quelling such disorders. A substantial majority (69%) also felt that there is too much violence on T.V. and in the movies.

It is significant to note that police officers in general felt that in order to stem the rising crime rate the criminal offenders must be given much stiffer penalties than they receive now. Fifty-one percent of the officers (61% of the detectives and executives and
46% of the uniformed patrolmen) favor capital punishment for persons convicted of crimes such as first degree murder, kidnapping, sabotage or treason, in spite of the fact that the state of Wisconsin does not allow capital punishment. When asked "whether they felt we needed stiffer penalties in cases involving misdemeanors and/or felonies," 64% indicated that there should be stiffer penalties for misdemeanors, and almost all the officers (97%) felt the same way toward felonies (the major crimes). In a near unanimous opinion, they opposed the parole system as now being practiced in the United States, because they strongly feel that when a criminal is given a specific sentence—whether it is life imprisonment or a specified number of years of confinement—he should be forced to serve it without being released on parole.

Politically, too, police officers generally leaned toward the conservative side. They have a higher voting turnout than the general population, for 78% of them voted in 1964 (it would have been much higher if 12% were not under the voting age). In that election year, of those who revealed their actual vote (69%), they voted almost two to one in favor of Johnson (45%) to Goldwater (24%). However, when asked "Which of the candidates (Nixon, Humphrey, Wallace) have you decided to vote for in 1968?" 35% favored Wallace, 33% Nixon, 5% Humphrey, while 27% were either undecided or gave no response. What surprised us most was that this particular community had not experienced any civil disorder per se in recent years, and yet in view of their general attitude toward law and order, a substantial majority of officers (68%) were attracted to either Wallace or Nixon.

On the Role and Status Perceptions of Police Officers

Generally, police officers possessed a strong sense of community service, dedication, and altruism. Sixty per cent of all police people and at the same time serving the community best through law enforcement work. Another 29% felt that the profession gave them a sense of job security. Only 4% felt that police work gave them excitement and adventure not to be found in other lines of work, while 2% chose it because of family tradition.

However, they also agreed that the general public does not extend due recognition to the police officers. The data show that although higher ideals motivated them to choose the law enforcement profession, a majority of police officers (58%) tend to develop an inferiority complex in their work, for they believe that the public generally tends to look down on them socially. Eighty per cent of the officers also felt that they are not being rewarded in terms of salaries and fringe benefits as they think they deserve. (This salary
schedules of this police department ranged from about $580 to $900 per month depending upon rank and seniority of the officers). One surprising finding was that when asked whether they would advise young people to go into police work, 74% answered affirmatively. It suggests that their lower reputational perception is largely due to the general public’s apathy toward police work, because most police officers believe that they are contributing something positive to the general well-being of the community.

Finally, it must be pointed out that police officers are not only conscious of their own status but quite defensive about their work and the police everywhere. We have already shown how sensitive and defensive they were to the charges of police brutality and the Chicago convention incident. To further check on this feeling we asked them the following question: “What educational requirements do you feel police officers should have?” The data show that 51% of all the respondents felt that education beyond high school is needed, but only 4% felt they should have a college degree. There is, however, marked difference between the relatively younger uniformed patrolmen and the somewhat older detectives and executives, since 60% of the former stated that police officers should have more than a high school education as compared to only 34% of the latter. These attitudes tend to reflect their own educational background, for within this department not only is there no single college graduate but the formal education of the detectives and executives is comparatively lower than that of the uniformed patrolmen. (In this connection, it is interesting to note that the governor of Wisconsin early this year proposed the establishment of a state-run police academy to train all police officers within the state.)

CONCLUSION

These findings are not entirely unknown, for both the Kerner Report and the National Crime Commission Report made it clear that police officers in general have one of the lowest formal educational attainments among all the professional groups in the country. Some of the disturbing findings are that:

1. The majority of police officers tend to develop an inferiority complex in their work, in spite of the higher ideals that motivated them to choose the police profession (because they believe that the public does not extend due recognition to the police officers).

2. They are excessively protective toward their own work and quite unreceptive to any kind of criticism toward police officers anywhere (e.g. their reactions to the Chicago violence).
3. They generally believe that social order can best be maintained by the maximum use of force by law enforcement officers and by imposing much stiffer penalties upon the criminals than they are given today.

4. They apparently have very little faith in the Supreme Court of the United States—the highest court deciding questions of law and the official body for interpreting the U.S. Constitution.

It must be cautioned that these findings are only preliminary and suggestive; however, any concerned reader cannot help but conclude that it is an urgent national task to intensify our efforts to train police officers with the ideals of democracy and constitutionalism either through in-service or out-service training, or both. It may well be that eventually education beyond high school (either college education or relevant police education through police academies or special institutes) must become the mandatory requirement for all those who seek a police career.