

Public Perception of Administration of Justice — the Police Role

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There are so many agencies and levels involved in the delivery of "justice" that the police role is only one stone on the pathway through the justice system.

The police role is a varied one within the justice system. Part of our role includes community based policing, which is a more pro-active stance allowing us to deal directly with citizens in a nonreactive approach to community issues and concerns.

We also act as social workers and resource finders for many of the people we come in contact with. This involves working with families, victims and offenders, sometimes as an alternative to introducing someone formally into the "system", other times in an effort to make that system work the best for everyone. Often times both offenders and victims are unaware of what the system has in store for them and what it has to offer them. As the "front door" to the system, police are most often the first people within the system that the public deals with. They look to us for support, help and solutions. As a result, we provide the public with counselling, advice, guidance, alternatives, support and where possible, a resolution to their concerns. Often, a resolution involves the introduction of someone into the formal workings of the system. Perhaps the most obvious role of the police within the system is reactive. As mentioned before, we are the front door to the Justice System. We respond to complaints from the public and introduce the offender into the system after determining if there is sufficient cause to do so. After this, we "pass the torch", so to speak, to the next level of the system to fulfill its obligations to the people.

The public perception of the police role within the justice system is as varied as the definition of the public. The public includes people who have no involvement with the police and feel a certain level of apathy about our role, having never had to call on our services. They simply have the expectation that should they require our services, they will be available with a certain degree of expedience.

For those who have had to call on our services, there is a certain expectation that we always have the power and authority to provide solutions. When we cannot always accommodate that expectation, they become frustrated. Not understanding the limitations of the system, and the small role we play in it, the public often blames the police for inaction or apathy, when in reality, we can only do what the system allows us to do.

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In cases where victims and witnesses become involved in the system, we pass them along to the next level. If they experience any degree of dissatisfaction with the next level, they often turn back to the previous level, the police, for answers. For many of the public, the police are the most accessible of the players in the justice system. We often become a sounding board for the public's frustrations with the system and what they perceive as its flaws.

Another group of people we deal with, the offender, has a very different view of the police role within the system. For many, having a better understanding of the system from a previous involvement, they also have a better understanding of our role and our limitations. They know how to "play the game" so to speak, and use the system to their advantage. They, perhaps better than anyone, understand the police role within the Justice System.

Overall, I think the public's perception of the police role within the justice system is based on a lack of understanding of the justice system as a whole. They tend to view the police as a bigger and more powerful entity than it really is. Operating under this misconception, they sometimes expect more from the police than we have the authority to give, and experience frustration when these expectations are not met. Although the majority of our citizens are supportive of the police, they lack the understanding of where we get our authority from and what our role within the system is. This lack of understanding and mis-communication is the biggest explanation for the difference between the public's perception and the police's perception of the police role within the justice system.

The media plays a role in the public's perception of the police role. People often believe what they see on television and read to be the truth, forgetting what is fact and what is fiction. People who have had no other involvement with police rely on what they do see and hear and read to form their opinions. The media can be a great tool in educating the public about all roles in the justice system.

Community based policing aids in the public understanding of the police role. The more positive contact the police have with the community, the better they understand who we are and what we do. The more exposure the police have with the community, the more we can educate people about our role within the system, and we can work together to set goals for the community and for what they want our role to be. The police are accountable to the public, and the more we work together, the better that relationship will be.