



How to take a systems approach to effect change in policing

A recent presentation to the LA Police Commission addressed how to evolve the police academies of today to deliver the officers of tomorrow

In September 2020, the Los Angeles Police Commission held a series of virtual workshops to solicit perspectives from community members, interested parties and advocates with regard to the future of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).

The RAND Corporation has a history of work with the LAPD, and members of their staff were invited to speak. The following is the text of Bob Harrison's presentation and is printed here to give readers a sense of the process the Commission is using to inform their work and the perspectives they invited. Harrison's remarks are Harrison's perspectives and are not the result of a formal RAND project.

It's a pleasure to be here and to speak with the members of the [Board of Police Commissioners Advisory Committee](#) and staff. I'll spend my time talking about ways to think about effective long-term change at the strategic level, and also one specific consideration – to transition the [recruit academy](#) to a blended format to enhance your success to create the officer of the future.



Like any other public-facing business, the police need to ensure their message is in public view, and that their work is also transparent. (LAPD Instagram)

RECRUITMENT, HIRING, RETENTION AND TRAINING

I'm [Bob Harrison](#). I'm a researcher at the [RAND Corporation](#), headquartered in Santa Monica, California and Washington DC. I work primarily in homeland security and justice policy research and am a member of [RAND's Center for Quality Policing](#). I am also a consultant to police agencies throughout California and the US. For the past 12 years, I've been the course manager for the [CA POST Command College](#), a foresight-based graduate program working to create the next generation of police leaders.

I spent more than 30 years in policing, and have worked throughout my career on ways to innovate to better meet the public safety needs of our communities. An area of emphasis for much of my work is the study of, and research into, the history of the future.

RAND has worked with and for the Department of Justice, Homeland Security and agencies and institutions across the nation on a variety of policing issues – including emerging technologies, use of force, budgeting, recruiting and training. In 2010, [RAND completed a study of LAPD's recruitment and hiring processes](#), and we have partnered with the LAPD on a number of other projects and research efforts for law enforcement.

Recent RAND studies and reports include police perspectives on the defunding debate, [responding to persons experiencing homelessness](#), [autonomous vehicles](#) and the true costs of crime to society. RAND also authored a report in 2018 entitled [Truth Decay](#) that deals with the decline of public trust in institutions and of objective research.

In truth, like all politics, all policing is local, even with an agency the size of the LAPD. That is an advantage in most cases, and can also be a disadvantage as the public may see all police agencies as the same. Like any other public-facing business, the police need to ensure their message is in public view, and that their work is also transparent.

The core problem arises, however, as we look for ways to make policing more effective, and more responsive to the problems we will face today and tomorrow. Like public health, climate change, education policy and other highly complex issues, policing defies easy answers or risk-free attempts to solve what we may see as deficits. In fact, although we often say that the police are a part of the criminal justice system, which is true, they are a critical component of a larger and more complex system – the public safety system. The product of the police, in my opinion, is not arrests and citations or crimes solved. It is an absence of fear of crime. However the police can accomplish that, along with the things we normally expect of them, is on the right path to success.

I'm a systems guy. Rather than looking at the symptoms of an issue, my work dives more deeply into the larger system in play. For your work, there are four things to consider:

- 1. All systems are perfectly designed to give you the outcomes you're experiencing**, whether or not the results are what you want. To get different results, you need a different system.
- 2. Any action taken to resolve a short-term crisis will inevitably worsen the long-term issue.** We tend to fiddle with things or change one thing quickly to calm the hue and cry. In almost all instances, that makes solving the underlying problems worse, in part because you take away the tension necessary to make a more significant change.
- 3. Third, in any systems change, there will be a lag between the actions taken and the observable results.** People, though, are impatient and want to see a difference immediately. That leads them to solve short-term problems, which gets us back to the second rule – it will make things worse in the long run if you don't have the patience and wisdom to allow the system to adjust and do what you really want.
- 4. Finally, any decision made using judgment and intuition alone is likely to be wrong.** As humans, we tend to look at the surface, so we see the symptoms and simpler fixes. The urgency and emotions make us want to "do something." Policing, though, is complex, ill-defined, and takes place in fluid and changing environments. It isn't a matter of fixing the problem or even looking for the right solution, for which there often isn't one. It is a matter of more or less, effective versus ineffective. To succeed, you want to use data and analysis, not judgment informed by intuition alone.

You and the Los Angeles Police Department already have some systems-level change in progress, and I would encourage you to consider ways to strengthen them. [LAPD's Community Safety Partnerships](#) are an example of systemic change. Having read the [UCLA study on the pilot effort](#), you can see that true change takes years, and that trust in the police doesn't happen overnight. I applaud expanding the CSP citywide and look forward to seeing the results it will create. I'm aware you are also considering a number of other modifications to enforcement strategies, budget allocations, and neighborhood policing. For each area you are considering, I encourage you to take the systems view.

In most jurisdictions though, service demands, crime calls and community issues occupy most of an officer's time. There are ways, however, that we can alter the outcomes at the systems level.

One is to create change at the starting point – the ways in which we recruit, select and onboard new officers. To create a pool of officers who will accept system-level change as a part of their future, we should consider ways to change the recruit academy to match our intent.

TRAINING

My recommendation to the Commission would be to formally encourage LAPD to transition the police academy to a blended format, one that uses already robust technology platforms to deliver academy content. If we move the cognitive domains of the basic course to [online modalities](#), it would free time to devote effort to far more critical things. Looking at POST mandates, there are at least 200 hours of the traditional academy program that could be moved to Zoom-style presentations and also to individual modules for study and assessment.

We could also consider options to have recruits complete the academic portions of the course prior to the first day of the academy, thus sending only those recruits to the campus who already have a running start at success.

The academy experience would then become the applied portions of the skills necessary to succeed. Emotional and social intelligence, critical thinking, applied criminal law, mediation, counseling, conflict resolution, and de-escalation and escalation training should be delivered to the point of automaticity.

Of special note is the need to train police officers to the point of automaticity on arrest and control, weaponless defense and ways to subdue combative subjects without resorting to higher levels of force. In several of the tragic incidents we have seen this year, officers were hands-on with subjects and failed to control them prior to the use of deadly force. Greater proficiency for all police departments is a demonstrated need.

As we transition to active learning, we could bundle the skills into scenario training and role-playing. Look at [emerging VR platforms](#) for individual and group practice. Right now, RAND is working with several partners, including LAPD's Training Division, to create a proof-of-concept VR platform for decision-making for officers in the field.

Throughout the academy, teach them and make them demonstrate competence in their most critical skill set – communications. The officer’s most effective weapon is not their gun, baton or TASER. It is their mouth. Teach them effective communication skills, including the non-verbals, and that skill will resolve most of the situations they will encounter.

This does not mean they do not need to be physically fit, and also emotionally prepared for the job. We can, though, minimize time spent in rote activities and replace them with applied skills, [simulations](#), role-playing and VR platforms to create the officer of the future.

CONCLUSION

Mark Twain once said that history doesn’t repeat, but it does rhyme. Right now, we’re rhyming with the late 1960s and early 1970s. With the passage of civil rights legislation in 1965, there was significant funding pushed to community-based organizations, all of which were well-intended as they began work to improve the quality of life in urban America. By the early 1970s, crime began to rise sharply, and the community organizations weren’t organized in ways that would help bring the crime rate down. Their money eventually shifted to law enforcement. Legislation to impact crime, especially the Three Strikes law, systematically emptied the cities of young men, setting the stage for the levels of incarceration we see today.

I would strongly encourage you not to repeat the stories of the past, but to build new ones where the police and their communities work together to create safety and an absence of fear of crime. Transitioning the recruit academy to develop and hone the necessary skills to deal with the complexity of policing would be a great first step.

Of course, the RAND Corporation stands ready to collaborate on any issues for which you or the Department wishes to have a deeper understanding – our motto is objective analysis, effective solutions, and we would enjoy opportunities to help shape policing for the City of Los Angeles and throughout the nation.

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