



The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing:
Building Legitimacy and Public Trust Through Civilian Oversight
Submitted by The National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement
January 9, 2015

I. Introduction

The current crisis of mistrust and breaking or broken relationships between police and the communities they are sworn to serve and protect is one of the most pressing challenges facing the nation. In communities of color particularly, policing practices that are perceived to be overly harsh, unjust, or unfair, regardless of whether those practices are deemed lawful, can undermine police legitimacy. A single officer-involved shooting has the potential to not only shake the public's confidence in the police but, as has been seen in Ferguson, Missouri, rock its very foundation. When the members of one racial group are significantly more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, or even shot by the police, maintaining trust becomes immensely more difficult. A lack of transparency only serves to increase the divide.

Time and again, cities everywhere have found themselves scrambling to establish civilian oversight in the wake of a scandal and complaints of law enforcement misconduct (irrespective of whether or not allegations are substantiated). People are demanding changes, but what does it mean when the cry for civilian oversight is issued?

The public expects, and experience has shown, that strong, independent oversight builds legitimacy and public trust, through increased police transparency and accountability to the public served. Oversight fosters accountability through independent investigations or auditing of police misconduct complaints, and also can identify needed changes in police practices and training, provide a meaningful voice or forum for the public, and form a crucial bridge between the public and the police. Just as importantly, oversight encourages enhanced transparency about the work of law enforcement. Increased transparency, trust, and communication between the police and the public, facilitated through effective oversight, can lead to greater cooperation between the police and the public in achieving the ultimate goal of decreased crime and increased public safety.

Importantly, civilian oversight provides a mechanism to bring together the many stakeholders involved in supporting trusted, respectful, and effective law enforcement efforts. Oversight breaks down the walls between police and the public and enhances their understanding of each other by reminding police that they ultimately serve the public's interests, and by educating the community on the unique and difficult challenges officers encounter every day. While many take polarizing, divisive positions regarding the role of law enforcement, civilian oversight practitioners strive to work collaboratively with all interests involved to ensure careful, unbiased evaluation of facts and policies in order to achieve solutions that address both the needs of police to protect public safety and the needs of the public to trust their police.

Citizen oversight of law enforcement is a critical facet of any well-founded effort to strengthen the relationship between police and communities and to build public trust, all while promoting effective policing. And it is one of the only mechanisms proven to ensure sustainable reforms. Civilian oversight alone is not sufficient to yield the legitimacy in which both the public and law enforcement share an interest; without outside oversight, however, no collection of efforts to secure such legitimacy can be considered complete or directly responsive to the public's demands for greater participation in, and understanding of, their local law enforcement.

II. Background of civilian oversight of law enforcement and NACOLE

In its simplest meaning, civilian oversight may be defined as one or more individuals outside the sworn chain of command of a police department who take up the task of holding that department and its members accountable for their actions. Contrasted with internal accountability mechanisms commonly found in law enforcement (i.e., internal affairs), independent police review offers a method of civilian involvement in accountability that is often, but not always, external to the department. Its independence from the agency or the sworn chain of command that it seeks to hold accountable allows it to address a wide range of concerns without any actual or perceived bias, and to ensure that policing is responsive to the needs of the community.

Civilian oversight may be established in response to recurring problems in a particular law enforcement agency, such as a pattern or practice of the use of excessive force or repeated complaints of racial profiling. Sometimes oversight is initiated proactively by a local municipality to identify and correct such issues before they become more widespread and difficult to rectify. Often, however, oversight is generated in response to a single, particularly high-profile allegation or incidence of police misconduct. Whatever the circumstances, police oversight is now found in cities and counties both large and small, and in every geographic region of the nation, as well as in other countries.

While practices vary according to the roles of the oversight entity or the laws of its jurisdiction, it is common for civilian oversight agencies to be both an independent source and a repository of qualitative and quantitative data. Oversight agencies may issue public reports on the number, type, and outcome of misconduct investigations; lawsuits; uses of force; or detentions and arrests. They may provide on-scene monitoring of critical incidents, such as officer-involved shootings, or of mass social gatherings, including protests and demonstrations; and they may subsequently provide the public with a singularly independent account of the actions taken by the police, evaluating whether those actions were appropriate under the circumstances or showed a need for some measure of reform. In addition to the issuance of public reports, qualified and experienced oversight entities may also assess a police department's policies, training curricula, and recruitment standards, among other procedures, in order to compare them against the prevailing standards in a perpetually dynamic profession. The effectiveness of oversight in any particular community is dependent on a host of factors including political and budgetary support, ready access to information including police files, records, and performance data, the training and expertise of oversight personnel, and acceptance by the local law enforcement agency and community.

In 1995, as citizen oversight experienced significant growth and expansion across the country—one of several growth periods in the last thirty years—the National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (NACOLE) was established as the nation's only professional

association of organizations and individuals working directly in oversight. With hundreds of members across the nation and around the world, NACOLE has legitimized police oversight as a professional field of study and practice and facilitated the development of professional standards, including a Code of Ethics, as well as core competencies and training guidelines for oversight practitioners. NACOLE also hosts an annual training conference where civilian overseers and other interested stakeholders meet and exchange information and ideas about issues facing law enforcement oversight.

III. Defining the role of police in a democratic society

In a democratic society, the principle obligations of the police are to protect citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms and to prevent crime and disorder. Sir Robert Peel recognized that police must maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police. Peel's principles form the basis of American law enforcement, and comprise an approach to policing derived almost exclusively from public cooperation, continuously earned and maintained through public approval, trust, and perceptions of legitimacy.

The proper role for police, thus generally defined, is not static. As society changes, what the public expects from police changes. Broadly, the U.S. Constitution provides a framework of limitations for the police, and state legislatures may also pass laws dictating police roles and conduct; but ultimately, the police are required to be responsive to their specific community. However, the needs and views of that community may change over time. Through active dialogues with the public and law enforcement, civilian oversight brings stakeholders together and provides valuable feedback to law enforcement about how their policies and practices are perceived by their specific community, avoiding divisive discourse and toxic rhetoric. Through review of police practices and training, outside auditors and practitioners can help law enforcement identify areas where their perception of their role has become outdated. Oversight also communicates back to the public about how their police force is performing and whether the department's policies and programs maximize the public's interests and reflect local values.

IV. Building a culture of transparency

Civilian oversight, in even its most basic forms, inherently enhances transparency – it allows individuals from outside a law enforcement agency's sworn chain of command access to the inner workings of that agency, albeit to different degrees. A primary focus of civilian oversight is using this expanded transparency to increase accountability and also to advance community understanding of the work of law enforcement. Police departments are often accused of having an insular culture; those departments that have embraced civilian oversight have been able to neutralize this criticism, and ensure appropriate information is made available for public review. Moreover, in those jurisdictions where strict laws prevent public disclosure of significant amounts of information, a properly designed oversight entity can be the eyes and ears for the public, even if unable to release specific, identifiable information itself.

V. Procedural justice

Central to police legitimacy is the idea of procedural justice: perceptions of fairness in the administration of justice and the fair and impartial exercise of police discretion. And, while officers have an obligation to be impartial and enforce the law fairly, procedural justice also calls upon officers to treat people with dignity and respect, as doing so is equally as important, if not

more so. Procedural justice encompasses not only the way an officer interacts with the public, but also requires that members of the public have an effective procedure to raise concerns about police conduct. Unfortunately, individuals who feel they have been wronged by a police officer are often hesitant to approach the department that employs the officer with their concerns. They may feel intimidated, or doubtful that the department will be interested in, or even capable of, taking a truly unbiased look at their concern. Without an alternative procedure to raise concerns about officer behavior, some members of the public are left to conclude that they have no trustworthy, legitimate avenue for such redress and, even more troublingly, view the entire law enforcement "system" as structured in a way for the police to avoid being held accountable.

Outside review of the police provides an opportunity for those who seek to complain against the police to raise their concerns with fellow citizens, who do not fall within the sworn chain of command of the police department. Acknowledging that oversight agencies' authorities vary from place to place, it is often these agencies that skeptical complainants can turn to in order to feel that their concerns will truly be heard and responded to fairly. Beyond providing procedural justice for specific complaints, overseers can also establish a procedure for review of critical and high profile incidents, such as officer-involved shootings, in-custody deaths, and uses of a TASER, all of which can leave a community clamoring for justice and, potentially, lacking faith in the involved police department's ability to remain unbiased. Furthermore, as civilian overseers look at individual complaints or critical incidents, they gain unique insights and perspectives that put them in a position to identify systemic issues that are most effectively addressed through a change in department-wide policy or training. Ultimately, this impact on systemic issues can further improve police-public interactions and strengthen the community's belief that their police are procedurally just.

Finally, as law enforcement agencies work to adopt a culture of procedural justice, civilian oversight can help communicate to the public the steps being taken and why they are worthy of trust and will serve legitimacy. Police oversight also can audit such efforts to provide the community with reliable information about police agency progress. Law enforcement agencies that are proactively and genuinely striving to provide constitutional policing that is responsive to community needs can find that their own attempts to communicate their efforts to the public are futile because the agency has lost credibility with the public. However, when independent overseers who are charged with looking critically at the department communicate the same message about the department's reform efforts, the public may be more receptive to the message. This is one more illustration of how civilian oversight acts as a bridge connecting, or in some cases reconnecting, law enforcement agencies with the communities they serve.

VI. Protection of civil rights

Police oversight is an important mechanism for ensuring civil rights protections. Civilian oversight has its roots in the Civil Rights Movement. Issues of race and policing are central to the history of oversight, as well as NACOLE. Thus, the oversight community recognizes the important role it plays in identifying, understanding, and addressing discriminatory and unconstitutional police practices. Accordingly, oversight practitioners are at the forefront of investigating, reviewing, and auditing individual cases or patterns of potential civil rights violations, foremost amongst them allegations of racial profiling and biased policing, as well as complaints of illegal searches, excessive force, or unlawful detentions and arrests.

Citizen oversight also helps to ensure police engage in long-term, meaningful outreach to historically disenfranchised and marginalized communities, such as persons with mental illness, the LGBTQ community, homeless individuals, and persons with disabilities. Additionally, independent overseers provide a voice and a forum for these communities, both before and after major incidents involving them and the police have occurred. As with other types of complaints, police oversight entities improve the overall quality of internal investigation of allegations of bias and discrimination in police encounters. With the backing of civilian oversight, many law enforcement agencies across the nation support and vigorously protect the rights of minority and marginalized communities in their jurisdictions.

VII. Recommendations

1. Ensure that police officers continue to have the proper tools, guidance, training, and supervision to carry out their law enforcement responsibilities safely and in accordance with individuals' constitutional rights.
2. Make constitutional policing and transparency core values of policing, as well as building systems of accountability that include independent oversight to carry out those values to support the many police officers who uphold their oaths, engendering greater public trust.
3. Ensure police continue to function as a part of the community; that police continue to work to cultivate legitimacy by engaging with the community fairly, impartially, and respectfully; and, that the police become more directly responsive to the community.
4. Improve the quality and integrity of police disciplinary systems, including investigations of misconduct complaints and uses of force, while vigilantly safeguarding the rights of officers.
5. Ensure that independent oversight is a part of efforts to identify and resolve underlying systemic problems within law enforcement, with a primary focus on reducing and preventing misconduct and enhancing accountability, as well as promoting effective policing and developing strategies for positive organizational change.

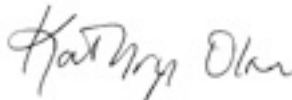
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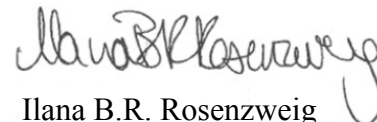
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