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Positive Policing

By Matthew W. Rebeck, M.P.A., and E. Paul Bertrand, M.S.Ed.



Today's headlines call for better relationships between law enforcement agencies and their respective communities. For decades, police strategies have vacillated wildly, all with the stated goal of meeting the needs of the people they serve. Have they instead met the needs of external political forces?

In the wake of recent high-profile events, our nation cries out for a solution that draws police together with their communities. We need a solution that maintains public safety, rebuilds public trust, and allows acknowledgement and healing for the marginalized members of society.

New Approach

Definition

According to the University of Pennsylvania, “Positive Psychology is the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.”¹

Positive Psychology was founded by Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman as he pursued research on happiness and, ultimately, well-being. He studied the psychological makeup of humans and identified five major pillars of well-being that allow people to thrive, identified by the acronym PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment).

- 1) *Positive emotion* covers the emotions we feel regarding past events, such as gratitude and forgiveness; our present, such as love, interest, and pride; and our future, such as hope and inspiration. We feel all these emotions and many others, including joy, serenity, awe, and amusement, when things go well and we have reason to expect a bright future.
- 2) *Engagement*, or flow, results when someone fully deploys their skills, strengths, and attention to an appropriately challenging task. It is a state of being totally consumed in what we do, to the point where we lose track of time.
- 3) *Relationships* are the positive human connections that give our life fulfillment.
- 4) *Meaning* encompasses our purpose in life and sense of belonging; it is characterized by being part of and serving something greater than ourselves.
- 5) *Accomplishment* involves our pursuit of achievement, competence, success, and mastery. We must strive for it over time with both skill and effort.²



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Garden Metaphor

Over several decades in the field, Dr. Seligman concluded that mainstream psychology focused almost entirely on removing misery from people's lives, operating mostly under the premise that happiness would result. He argued that eliminating misery does not cultivate happiness, but, rather, results in emptiness.³

He used the analogy of a flourishing garden to illustrate his point.⁴ This analogy can relate directly to police service. We have heard repeatedly that law enforcement officers emulate guardians, warriors, or, more often, both. Further, we have heard creative derivatives, such as champions.⁵ Would it not be more appropriate if we viewed officers as gardeners instead?

If we saw humanity and, specifically, our communities as gardens, all with the potential of flourishing, what would law enforcement's focus be? Pulling weeds? Clearing the ground in areas, leaving it empty so someone else could plant and tend to the garden? Spreading weed killer in "problem areas" so that no weeds (or, for that matter, desirable plants) could grow for months or even years? Keeping out or blocking pests?

Or, would police fully embrace their role as gardeners—planting seeds; providing sunlight, water, and fertilizer; and cultivating the gardens? Then, would they hold at least some responsibility for and share in the pride of the harvest? What could officers do to plant, fertilize, and cultivate the gardens of our communities?

This is an excellent metaphor for society and police service in general. If officers are gardeners, what gardening skills do they need to be successful? Just pulling weeds? Can we reimagine policing to be more caring and thoughtful with our pruning and weed-pulling duties?

Certainly, pruning must occur, but we should proceed carefully when doing it. We need to focus intently to ensure we see the most minute level of detail and practice extreme patience. Also, we do not want to prune one single flower or positive portion of our garden that has the potential to grow.

We should cultivate our garden and protect it at every opportunity. This includes critically assessing each situation and pruning appropriate misbehavior. But, we also must look to water, fertilize, and expose our gardens to sunshine as much as

possible. Just as sometimes our plants need stakes or other supports to grow, we must act as supports to our communities so they grow and thrive. We should do this out of love and for the eventual reward of the harvest.

To become effective gardeners, police services need to rethink some of the ways they carry out even their most basic functions. This will require commitment from the highest levels of government. And, agencies will need to focus on collaboration and training.

For instance, police officers respond to almost all 911 calls. Often, they do so alone, even when lacking training or expertise to handle the emergency, such as when persons suffering from mental illness are involved. Partnerships with other types of public service agencies, like those that routinely serve such persons, or with informal community leaders dramatically could change the outcome of certain 911 response events. Sending untrained officers alone into almost all situations is just one example of imprecise pruning, rather than supporting and cultivating a needy piece of our community garden.

Officer Motivation

Police leaders must understand what motivates others in their organization. To this end, the core leadership classes at the FBI National Academy all contain blocks of instruction on motivation. In these blocks, we learn that motivation can be broken down into two categories: extrinsic (e.g., salary, equipment, thrilling and dynamic work environment) and intrinsic (e.g., helping others, public service, belief in a cause greater than oneself).⁶

It is no longer acceptable to have officers who are motivated only extrinsically. Catching offenders must be viewed through a different lens in that we should see those individuals as human beings, community members, and neighbors who have gone astray. Officers must consider more than just enforcing laws. How can we keep the community safe, especially victims of crime, while placing that human being who has broken the law in a position to best learn, rehabilitate, and grow from the experience?

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For many years, law enforcement has focused on statistics, specifically arrests in the name of crime reduction, at great cost to community relations. Using the garden analogy, this statistics-driven focus has led to a ground-clear, weed-killer type of police response in many instances. This purges the ground of both good and bad vegetation and, worse yet, prevents anything desirable from growing there for quite some time. These policies have eroded public trust and cost established relationships with members and leaders of these communities. We are paying for that loss today—not just in law enforcement but in society as a whole.

We must change. Law enforcement must change. Policing must change. Public safety service must change. Government oversight must change. We need to focus more on relationships and forego statistics as anything more than a quantitative diagnostic tool. Every crime prevented through positive relationships negates the need for an arrest. If we prevent a crime, that will remove an arrest statistic, and should we not celebrate that just as much?

Relationships are qualitative and allow us to understand each other as human beings, neighbors, and fellow community members. They enable us to identify and discuss our individual and collective needs. Diverse relationships allow us the most optimal and creative pathways to meeting those needs. Cooperative relationships help us to prune our community gardens in the most precise and surgical manner, allowing every possible opportunity for positive growth.

Brighter Future

Positive Psychology as a solution is a new mindset. No longer can officers exist only to take offenders off the streets. Police professionals are out there to make communities better. First, they bring safety and stability to any given situation. Then, they assess the circumstances and critically think of the best path forward. They need to think past the immediate situation and embrace long-term thinking (i.e., the infinite mindset).⁷

Officers no longer should have to do this alone in situations where better-trained professionals or experts just as easily could be dispatched as well. Police should see their mission as guiding and encouraging each member of society along a path of positive growth. In some cases, that will necessarily start with an arrest, but that should not be the assumption before even making contact.

Gardeners do not hold complete responsibility for the outcome of the garden because, of course, they do not control the weather, the amount of sunshine, or unforeseen natural disasters. In the same way, police cannot be responsible for every outcome in our communities. We cannot change or avoid the nature of some people who wish to do harm to others, but, again, we must emphasize being precise and caring in all enforcement actions.

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Our officers also must learn new techniques that only can be categorized as self-care. Stress reduction (e.g., mindfulness based) is one example of tangible training that every new recruit should be equipped with. Other topics include de-escalation, conflict resolution, suicide intervention, interpersonal skills, and relationship building. We meet many members of society when they are not at their best, and we always have to be at our best. Doing this requires deliberate training.

Police services began this journey long ago with many community policing initiatives, all emphasizing the need to interact with people in a nonenforcement capacity as much as possible. Many community policing programs are assets to their communities. However, programs are not enough. We need a change in mindset, ethos, and culture. Every officer needs to strive for a mindset that promotes the overall health and well-being of the entire community. Officers can be trained in Positive Psychology so they can use those skills and pass along the tenets of PERMA in their interactions with all community members.

As a society, we must believe in law and order. Anything less dooms us to failure. Just as a gardener cannot allow weeds to spread and grow wild, overtaking the garden, police cannot completely forget the weeding and pruning. We have communities across our nation where this has happened. The headlines clearly show a lack of commitment to and respect for fellow human life because the homicide rate in these communities is outrageous. However, the goal for such communities can never be just to clear out the bad. The goal must have as much, if not more, focus on cultivating the good.

Conclusion

As you have read in this article, whether as a law enforcement officer or as a member of the community, you likely focus on others and what they should or should not do. Let us each look at the roles that we play as individuals and assess what our roles in the garden will be. We should look at it like an individual relationship. What part of this relationship do you control? That is where we ask you to focus. Ultimately, we would argue that society would be better off if we all viewed ourselves as gardeners.

“Positive Psychology as a solution is a new mindset.”

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Resources

- Positive Policing Spotlight: Applying the Concept (<https://leb.fbi.gov/spotlights/positive-policing-spotlight-applying-the-concept>)

Endnotes

¹ “Positive Psychology Center,” University of Pennsylvania, School of Arts and Sciences, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>.

² “PERMA Theory of Well-Being and PERMA Workshops,” University of Pennsylvania, School of Arts and Sciences, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/learn-more/perma-theory-well-being-and-perma-workshops>.

³ Martin E. P. Seligman, *The Hope Circuit: A Psychologist’s Journey from Helplessness to Optimism* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2018).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lieutenant Jeffrey Miller, Gresham, Oregon, Police Department (paper, FBI National Academy, Quantico, VA, 2020); and S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The Champion Mindset: An Ideology Forged Within Community* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2011).

⁶ Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, “Self-Determination Theory: A Macrotheory

of Human Motivation, Development, and Health,” *Canadian Psychology* 49, no. 3 (2008): 182-185, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a32f/3435bb06e362704551cc62c7df3ef2f16ab1.pdf>.
⁷ Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2019).