

The Police

THE POLICE—some 420,000 people working for approximately 40,000 separate agencies that spend more than \$2½ billion a year—are the part of the criminal justice system that is in direct daily contact both with crime and with the public. The entire system—courts and corrections as well as the police—is charged with enforcing the law and maintaining order. What is distinctive about the responsibility of the police is that they are charged with performing these functions where all eyes are upon them and where the going is roughest, on the street. Since this is a time of increasing crime, increasing social unrest and increasing public sensitivity to both, it is a time when police work is peculiarly important, complicated, conspicuous, and delicate.

“Police work” is a phrase that conjures up in some minds a dramatic contest between a policeman and a criminal in which the party with the stronger arm or the craftier wit prevails. To be sure, when a particularly desperate or guileful criminal must be hunted down and brought to justice, there are heroic moments in police work.

The situations that most policemen deal with most of the time are of quite another order, however. Chapters 2 and 3 of this report have shown that much of American crime, delinquency, and disorder is associated with a complex of social conditions: Poverty, racial antagonism, family breakdown, or the restlessness of young people. During the last 20 years these conditions have been aggravated by such profound social changes as the technological and civil rights revolutions, and the rapid decay of inner cities into densely packed, turbulent slums and ghettos.

It is in the cities that the conditions of life are the worst, that social tensions are the most acute, that riots occur, that crime rates are the highest, that the fear of crime and the demand for effective action against it are the strongest. It is in the cities that a large proportion of American policemen work and that a large proportion of police money is spent. Though there are 40,000 separate law enforcement agencies in the Nation, 55 of them, the police departments of the cities of more than 250,000 population, employ almost one-third of all police personnel. Policing a city of more than one million population costs \$27.31 per resident per year; policing a city of less than 50,000 costs less than one-third as much, or \$8.74.

A great majority of the situations in which policemen intervene are not, or are not interpreted by the police to be, criminal situations in the sense that they call for arrest with its possible consequences of prosecution, trial, and punishment. This is not to say that the police intervene in these situations mistakenly. Many of them are clear public nuisances that the community wants stopped: Radios blaring or dogs barking at 3 o'clock in the morning, more or less convivial groups obstructing sidewalks, or youths throwing snowballs at passing motorists.

Many situations involve people who need help whether they want it or not: Helpless drunks out in freezing weather, runaway boys who refuse to go home, tourists in search of exciting night life in a dangerous neighborhood. Many of them involve conduct that, while unlawful, cannot be prevented or deterred to any great degree by means now at the disposal of the criminal justice system: Using narcotics, prostitution, gambling, alcoholism. Many situations, whether or not they involve unlawful conduct, may be threatening: A sidewalk orator exercising the right of free speech in the midst of a hostile crowd, a midnight street corner gathering of youths whose intentions are questionable, an offer by a belligerent drunk to lick any man in the house.

All of these situations could involve the violation of some ordinance or statute. All of them could lead to a serious breach of public order, or for that matter to a serious crime. Much of police work is seeing to it they do not lead to this extreme. This means becoming involved in the most intimate, personal way with the lives and problems of citizens of all kinds.

It is hard to overstate the intimacy of the contact between the police and the community. Policemen deal with people when they are both most threatening and most vulnerable, when they are angry, when they are frightened, when they are desperate, when they are drunk, when they are violent, or when they are ashamed. Every police action can affect in some way someone's dignity, or self-respect, or sense of privacy, or constitutional rights. As a matter of routine policemen become privy to, and make judgments about, secrets that most citizens guard jealously from their closest friends: Relationships between husbands and wives, the misbehavior of children, personal eccentricities, peccadilloes and lapses of all kinds. Very often policemen must