

Confidence in police genuine but fragile

Police must be both Officer Friendly and Dirty Harry

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Phoenix police Sgt. Joel Tranter put it this way:

"You can contact someone for anything, a speeding ticket, jaywalking, walking down the sidewalk. What initially may be perceived as a simple contact, you could be dealing with a dangerous suspect."

Recent tragedies demonstrate anew the danger that haunts even the most routine of police tasks. But they also cast light on something less commonly recognized: the complex and contradictory relationship that exists between the public and the police.

This issue arose during recent research on Arizonans' trust in police by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University. The research was commissioned by the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board, or AZPOST, the state agency that oversees the recruitment, training and discipline of Arizona's police officers and sheriff's deputies.

AZPOST wanted to know how much Arizonans trust their police, and in general, the news was good: 89 percent of Arizona adults responding to a statewide opinion poll said they have either "a great deal" or "some" trust in police.

The positive results were lower among non-Whites than Whites, but even minority-group respondents registered levels above 80 percent. This trust was likely reflected in Phoenix and Glendale voters' recent approval of ballot measures to hire more officers.

But things aren't actually that simple. Participants in 10 focus groups we convened across Arizona confirmed their overall confidence in law enforcement - but only after complaining at length about episodes of police arrogance, rudeness, bias and incompetence, and expressing deep skepticism about how well police discipline their own. These Arizonans, diverse residents from all parts of the state, were far from cheerleaders.

How can Arizonans both revere police and criticize them? Because our relationship with police rests on a fundamental ambivalence on both sides. Police are sworn to "serve and protect" us, but in doing so regularly must compel, detain or otherwise coerce some of us. And officers must be trained to approach each of us with a healthy wariness.

The public, on the other hand, must obey officers and rely on their help. Yet many of us sometimes resent and even fear them. Further, the truth is that we want officers who can function as both Officer Friendly and Dirty Harry.

The traffic cop who pulls us over must be friendly, polite, kindly and patient. But the officer who responds to a carjacking must be tough, savvy and, if necessary, deadly.

Routine calls or traffic stops are the only times most Arizonans ever interact with police officers or sheriff's deputies. As such, they are the small, daily building blocks of public trust in police. Our research showed that Arizonans are nearly as concerned with how officers act as with what they do. Residents who feel they were treated respectfully by officers during routine encounters came away with their trust in police intact or enhanced, even when they also came away with a citation or other penalty.

Clearly, being both Officer Friendly and Dirty Harry is a difficult bundle of traits to sustain. And our research also shows that Arizonans know it. This is why studies like ours invariably report that police remain our most trusted public officials. Even the critics among us know how difficult, dangerous and unpleasant their job can be.

This ambivalence is easy to dismiss when a city mourns for another fallen officer. But it means that Arizonans' confidence in law enforcement is genuine but fragile. Our trust is extended cautiously and tempered by wariness about the power officers hold over us. We tend to forgive officers' small transgressions, but we're quick to worry that these minor misdeeds will lead down a slippery slope to serious wrongdoing.

For police agencies, safeguarding the police-public relationship means recruiting, training and promoting officers who can balance the traits noted above. That is, officers who remember that most individuals they encounter will be supportive, law-abiding residents looking only for a little respect and fair treatment.

It also means paying our respects to officers who bravely take on the "simple contacts" so the rest of us don't have to.

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