

6.10: Current Issues- Stereotypes in Policing

Human beings are infamous for stereotyping. A first impression when meeting a new person takes only seven seconds. According to Pitts (2013), smiling, shaking hands, introductions, speaking clearly, maintaining eye contact, looking smart, and not sitting down, are sure-fire ways to ensure a more positive stereotype; however regardless, the seven seconds is irrefutable.

Stereotyping in policing is almost a foregone conclusion. Citizens expect their police to protect them by being not only reactive but proactive. One of the most popular policing methods is to view a situation and proactively make a quick decision on whether or not a crime is about to occur, and if it is, stop it from happening. One of the ways police proactively operate is through stereotyping. "Police officers spend a great deal of time working their beats...one thing is common to all police officer working personalities: in an effort to know who or what is 'wrong' on their beat, police officers must know who is 'right' or who belongs." ^[1]

When officers cross over the line is when they leave out the step of asking the who, what, where, when, why, and how after the stereotyping occurs, to confirm their thoughts. It is at this point that the officer is engaging in a type of implicit bias policing and this opens many doors to corruption. It is another slippery slope that officers must always be aware of while performing their many duties.

"Stereotyping or Terry Stop" Example

No matter how controversial policing is today, one common thread is that citizens want police to be proactive, not reactive to violent crime. Whether it is stopping an active shooter in a school, a burglary, or even a robbery, proactivity in policing is necessary to halt horrendous crimes from occurring. In 1968 the United States Supreme Court decided *Terry v. Ohio*, which further explained reasonable searches under the 4th amendment and played a vital role in the below story.

I was one of six officers with my department, chosen to work in our first ever problem-solving unit (PSU). Our substation was placed in a neighborhood where 21 murders had occurred in just a few months. We were tasked with being proactive and working with the community to stop the bloodshed. The two-mile radius neighborhood were composed predominantly of minority residents, and their distrust of our presence was apparent immediately. The residents had stereotyped us as rotten apple police officers and at first, did not want our assistance, they did not trust us. This was further agitated by the fact that we were there to be proactive and stop any future murders from occurring. Plus, we had the *Terry v. Ohio* decision to assist with our proactive actions. The citizens did not understand what that meant. They also did not understand that as one of the officers pledged to protect the area, I was feeling like an unwanted officer in their neighborhood. They did not know that I got into policing to change the world, if even just a little. They did not know how frustrated it made me feel when no matter how hard I tried, no one would not trust me. One day, as a four-year-old child approached me for a police sticker, the mom grabbed the child by the arm and said, "Get away from that Po-Po, she is a Bi***, and don't you dare talk to her, ever, or you'll get it!" I cried that night when I got home from work, wondering how I could help this neighborhood if I couldn't even get one mom to trust me? Whether or not it was true, stereotyping had occurred in this neighborhood. Then on top of it, I had to utilize the *Terry v. Ohio* decision to be proactive, to keep the murders from occurring. It felt like a Catch-22 with no solution. The answer did not come to me instantly. All I could think to do was my job and stop the murders (as I was directed to do). I remembered that four-year-old in my everyday actions. I knew my efforts could make him safer, but would he ever understand? I utilized *Terry v. Ohio*, by learning the neighborhood, recognizing the residents, and learning who belonged, and who did not. I was either on foot or on a bicycle in this neighborhood due to the small size. This allowed for a lot of interaction with the residents. If I had reasonable suspicion to think a citizen was about to commit a crime or had evidence of a crime, *Terry v. Ohio* gave me the right to investigate further. At first, this angered the neighborhood. They felt we were harassing them, stereotyping them. I could understand how they felt that way, and instead of trying to make this neighborhood safe overnight, I decided to begin to change how the neighborhood perceived us, slowly. The way I did this was through education. Through my daily interactions, I talked to the citizens in the neighborhood about what I was doing and why. Instead of speaking in 'general' I spoke about only one incident at a time.

One night, at 2:00 a.m., I was walking with my partner through the neighborhood. I had to head back to the sub-station and as I rounded one building, I saw two citizens looking through a window of an apartment. I stopped and just watched. Everything ran through my mind. Had they lost their keys? Was this their apartment? Or, were they looking to break-in and burglarize the apartment, possibly even commit a home invasion and hurt those inside? All of this happened in seconds, not minutes. Because of *Terry v. Ohio*, I legally investigated. The two citizens did not live in the apartment and they were trying to burglarize it. One of the suspects had a gun. Because of *Terry v. Ohio*, I was able to be pro-active and stop this from occurring. A single mom and three children under six years of age lived in that apartment and were home. The mom did not trust banks and kept her savings

in between her mattresses. I do not know what I stopped that night. I do not know if the suspects would have used the gun, or if they would have found the mom's large cash savings or what else they might have taken; however, I did stop a burglary from occurring and that felt good. The next day while speaking to some of the citizens in the neighborhood, I explained this. I used this one example to explain why my unit was there. How we stopped this crime and how we all wanted to make a difference. This one story did not change how the neighborhood saw us; however, after many more stories such as this, I began to see a change.

Michelle, one of the citizens in the neighborhood got my cellular telephone number (yes we had cell phones back in the day!). She began calling me when she heard talk about a possible crime occurring. We hosted many events in the neighborhood as well. From ice cream socials, back-to-school fairs, and we even worked hard to find donations and get every child in the neighborhood a bicycle (or scooter). After three years, our substation closed. We had gone a year without a murder and the crime rate dropped 98%. To this day Michelle still calls me and we chat about what is currently occurring in our lives. Michelle is my friend and I dare say I think she thinks of me as her friend too. There was a lot of stereotyping that went on in that neighborhood during those years. I found my way through it all and I think the neighborhood did as well. In the end, we worked together through good ole community policing and made the area safe again.

1. Perez, D.W. (2011). *The paradoxes of police work*. Florence, KY: Cengage Publ. [↵](#)

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