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Unf@cking People's Problems: A Theory of Policing

Laura Huey¹ and Stephen Johnston

One of the problems that has plagued policing researchers over the past few decades – ourselves included – is the interminable question of ‘what do police do?’ It is a question to which one of us – Laura – has returned over and over again in her career (Huey 2007; Huey, Ferguson and Schulenberg 2022; Huey and Ricciardelli 2015). Scholars, after all, need to define and conceptualize things in order to test our theories. Some ideas, tasks, roles, institutions and other social creations are easy to define. Policing has not been one of those. In part, it's because it's not only a descriptive problem; it's also a normative one. What do we mean? Well, once you start to address the question of what police do, then you also have to wrestle with the much meatier issue of ‘what do we want police to do’? And therein lies the rub.

In this paper, we intend to present a purely descriptive way of thinking about what the public police do – as an institution and in their individual roles, whether that be as frontline patrol officers or in specialized or investigative units. We are, with a terrible degree of hubris not at all appropriate for our more modest colleagues, going to suggest that we can cover all of the necessary terrain of this question in one simple, over-arching concept: they un@ck people's problems.

Previous attempts at understanding policing

Before doing this, we should perhaps cover some already well-known territory in the form of previous conceptualizations of this institution and social role. One of the earliest scholarly attempts at understanding policing was Michael Banton's (1964) influential book, *The Policeman in the Community*. Within it, Banton argued that the police are essentially law enforcers (see also Manning 1995) – they exist to ensure social order through the enforcement of criminal and other laws. However, this was not entirely true in 1964 and is arguably not the sole or even core role of public policing today. You need not take our word for it. We can see this problem in Banton's conceptualization in that it had to be modified some three years later in the work of Egon Bittner (1967), who had to account for a more diverse set of functions that police serve in places like ‘skid row’. In his famous ethnography of policing on skid row, Bittner agreed that the police do enforce laws, but that enforcement is often instrumental rather than normative – meaning that police use the law to achieve a specific aim. Law enforcement is not, for the skid row police officer, an end in itself. What is the outcome that police seek to achieve? According to Bittner, it is peacekeeping, or order maintenance (see also (Fagan and Tyler 2004). In many communities, particularly marginalized ones, policing is, of necessity, more orientated to achieving a level of order rather than towards arresting and processing every violation of the law. Years later, in her own ethnography of skid row policing, Laura found Bittner's characterization to be as true in the early 2000s as it was in the 1960s (Huey 2007). Simply put, if police were to enforce every single law violation of which they had some knowledge, the criminal justice system would likely implode. Hence, the need for police discretion.

Other attempts to characterize policing seized on the fact that public policing is one of the few 24/7 public institutions available to which citizens can call and demand service for a range of

¹ We would like to thank Lorna Ferguson for her willingness to read a draft of this paper and her thoughtful suggestions.

criminal and non-criminal matters (Skogan 1990; Waddington 1993). The seeds of this approach can be seen in Bittner's 'theory of the police', in which he observes that policing is often less about pursuing criminals than it is about attending to the social work needs of those with mental illness, addiction and other mental and health problems (Bittner 1974). The social work model of policing did not, however, begin to pick up traction among researchers and, more interesting police practitioners and policymakers, until the 1990s, when it was incorporated into the community policing and problem-oriented policing models. Again, you need not take our word for this, in one of the more influential books on community policing from this period, Trajanowicz, Kappeler, Gaines and Bucqueroux (1998: 19) argue, "the fact is, social work has always been an important element of police work" and remains so under the banner of community policing. And, certainly, some practitioners of problem-oriented policing have explicitly stated that problem-oriented policing is where "social work meets law enforcement" (Jackson 2016).

Beyond these three influential theories of policing, there have been many, many other attempts to define policing and explain what it is that police do. Some scholars have focused on the entire institution; others have looked at very specific roles. Among the former, we might consider Ericson and Haggerty's (1997) treatment of police as 'knowledge workers' – that is, as an institution that produces knowledge of crime and related phenomena for a range of other social institutions. We might also look to Jean-Paul Brodeur's (2010: 139) definition of police as "agents authorized to use diverse means prohibited to the rest of policed society in order to uphold a particular kind of sociopolitical order", which contains a definition of who they are, as well as expressing a view as to what Brodeur believes they do. Among the latter, we can include Richard Ericson's (1991) characterization of frontline policing as 'reproducing order' and detectives as 'making crime' (Ericson 1993).

We also have a small body of researchers who, in attempting to wrestle with this thorny problem, have simply thrown up their hands, so to speak, and simply referred to police as 'service providers' who provide such a diffuse and varied body of services that they simply 'defy description' (Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki 2018; see also Shapland and Vagg 1987; Manning 2008). It is this particular thread that we wish to pick up in our own characterization of policing below.

What do police actually do? And, more importantly, what do we (as citizens) think they do?

Years ago, Laura was sitting across from the Chief of a small municipal police service. She does not recall how the discussion turned this, but at some point he related a story of being a young patrol officer called out to deal with an intruder in the attic of a senior citizen. The miscreant? A raccoon. As is often the case, there was no one else to take the call. This is hardly the first raccoon call of which we have heard. We've also seen countless images of police officers removing cans from the snouts of skunks and shepherding baby ducks across the road. Indeed, when Stephen was a young city slicker, he was once tasked with going out to round up a lost cow that had somehow ended up within his city's borders. And it's not just animal problems police resolve and/or are asked to 'fix'.

Every year any number of police services will put out a press release asking the public not to dial 9-1-1 for all sorts of reasons that seem pretty humorous to everyone but, presumably, the caller. For example, every year there is great citizen consternation in Laura's neighbourhood over the matter of fireworks – both the city sanctioned fireworks at a nearby park, and, more pressingly (for callers), the fireworks set off surreptitiously by supposed malefactors at midnight. The reason

we bring up such matters is that if you were to ask most police leaders ‘what do police do?’, they would likely say ‘public safety’, they take on a variety of tasks aimed at promoting public welfare, from arresting murderers to administering Narcan to someone suffering an overdose. And they are correct: many policing tasks do have a public safety component to them, but not all. And some only have a safety element to them, if we stretch our imaginings of what such things might entail into intellectual pretzels. Thus, ‘public safety’ does not quite suit.

What the police do, and what citizens clearly want them to do, is to unf@ck our problems. Someone somewhere has a situation that is f@cked up. By f@cked up, we mean, a situation the individual deems as problematic, necessitating a solution, and a solution that requires external assistance. Why call the police? Because, as our friend and colleague, Inspector (ret.) Monique Rollin, put it, citizens call because they expect “the unf@cker to be better equipped” and thus able to bring external skills, knowledge and resources to solve the problem. And that, not using force (Bittner 1970) is what the police do and what makes their occupational role so unique.

One of the best ways to think about this, we suggest, is to employ a ‘nodal governance’ framework to understanding policing. We realize this theoretical model did not really catch on among criminologists – which is shame because it’s so useful – and thus we are forced to explain it a bit here. Please bear with me. In what should have been a landmark theory paper for policing, Les Johnston and Clifford Shearing (2003) used the term ‘nodal governance’ to map inter-relations between different sets of institutional actors as part of what Laura has privately heard Shearing (see also Crawford and Lister (2006), refer to as a security ‘patchwork’ or ‘quilt’ of sorts. According to this theory, social networks are analogous to computer networks: both are constellations of interconnected nodes. In the case of policing, police are seen as part of a security network comprised of various institutional actors (ie. policymakers, insurance companies, private security). This network pools knowledge and resources on both a permanent and *ad hoc* basis as a means of managing common threats (Johnston 2006). As Laura has argued elsewhere (Nhan and Huey 2008), the police are not *just any* institutional actor in these networks, they are often *the* primary institution that mobilizes people, knowledge and resources, and without which these inter-institutional relations likely collapse (Drahos 2004). If security and security relations were a boat, some would be steering and some would be rowing (Crawford 2006) and, more often than not, because police have unequal access to the various forms of ‘capital’ that make processes actually flow, and thus produce outcomes, the police play a central role in both steering and rowing the boat.

At this point, many of you may be wondering what we mean by ‘capital’ and what this has to do with unf@cking problems. Rest assured, we will both explain ‘capital’ in this context and show how police access to capital allows for a lot of problems to be potentially unf@cked – from lost dogs to gun violence. Our friend Benoit Dupont (2004; 2006) has described ‘capital’ in this context as access to political, economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources that institutions can leverage to effect outcomes. Political capital refers to an institution’s or actor’s access to the machinery of political power and, in particular, the ability to use those connections to influence legislative, regulatory and other outcomes. In response to a series of violent crimes involving offenders out on bail, police associations – from both the executive and labour ranks – have been busily lobbying the Canadian federal government to enact bail reform. The ability to request and receive a meeting to put those issues across a legislator’s desk is an example of political capital. Economic capital is a bit self-explanatory. Policing commands a rather substantial portion of a government’s purse, thus as an institution police have access to sizable financial, human, technological and other resources. Cultural capital is an actor’s unique access to knowledge in a

given area. A friend of Laura's was formerly the head of crime analysis at her local police service. When she mentioned to him that she lived in a particular neighbourhood, he asked if she wanted the area crime stats. She quickly assured him she did not, as Laura prefers to operate under the delusion that the worst thing to happen in her little burg is the occasional stolen barbecue. Social capital refers to an actor's ability to rely on social connections to make something happen. For example, when a police officer picks up the phone to call another agency for help with someone who needs shelter. Symbolic capital is the prestige associated with the office of policing, as evidenced by the plethora of 'Mountie' tourist toys at any major Canadian airport. In the *Functions of Police in Modern Society*, Bittner (1974) suggests that 'calling the cops' is the paradigmatic example of citizens' symbolic recognition of the unique power of police to use force to restore order. They need not even use force to gain someone's compliance, it's enough that we know they have that power. The police in this context are both a symbol of the state and its ability to use coercion to maintain order, as well as a symbol in their own right of law and order. When one considers all of the different types of skills, knowledge and resources to which police have access, is it any wonder that most citizens see them as 24/7 problem solvers?

What does this conceptualization add that makes it any more valuable than any other?

I am forced to return to the fact that one of the difficulties in crafting a theory of policing is that parsing out who the police are, what they do, and what they want them to do are tricky tasks, both descriptively and prescriptively. Certainly, there may be some areas of convergence and overlap. For example, most people would likely say 'solving crime' but, when pressed, they may concede that solving crime should also be expanded to include 'preventing crime', or responding to local natural catastrophes, or finding a missing child. The latter two tasks clearly have little to nothing to do with crime, and yet they fall under the amorphous concept of 'public safety'.

Another common 'public safety call'? Something variously termed 'check welfare' – that is, the service call to ask police to ensure that someone is safe. Laura was once an accidental check welfare call and so she has some firsthand knowledge of how 'public safety' has led to something we might term 'mission creep' in policing. Essentially, what happened is that she went to bed, only to be woken up to someone pounding on her front door at 2am. Peering outside, she saw a police car. It turned out that her former husband, away visiting relatives and unable to get through to her on the phone, had called the New York state police, who in turn called the London Police, who very kindly dispatched a nice officer to make sure she hadn't killed herself. There was no likelihood that that would happen, but somehow he had managed to communicate to someone somewhere that she might be 'in danger' because she hadn't answered the phone. Being unable to raise her on the phone, he had a 'problem' and, not knowing who else to turn to, 'called the cops' to unf@ck his problem. Why? Because the police had the resources to send someone to check on her at 2am.

But the police response is so much more than about being able to be present 24/7. Let's walk through this scenario a little further. Had Laura been in physical danger, the dispatched police officer would have been able to administer CPR and call for paramedics to get her to the hospital. If paramedics were not available, the officer could have rushed her to the hospital herself. Had Laura been having a serious mental health crisis, the officer could have sectioned her under the provincial *Mental Health Act* and taken her to emergency services for a psychiatric admission. Had she been really, really not okay, for reasons other than suicide, the officer might have called for a coroner, detectives and some Forensic Identification personnel to come and process her house.

Had Laura not only died, but also been partially eaten by her dogs², the officer could have called for backup and the responding officers could have captured the dogs and taken them to the local humane society. In other words, not only would police be able to unf@ck her ex-husband's then problem, but, much like a good Swiss army knife, they would have had many different tools and skills to draw upon depending on the situation with which they were greeted. Plus, they can often mobilize their resources so much more quickly and efficiently than other institutions (see footnote 2 below).

If the public is the single biggest driver of police activity – and they are (Black 1973; Ericson 1991) – then what we ask the police to do is what they do and how we need to define them. And, as Reiss (1971) found several decades ago, most of what we ask them to do has very little to do with crime. This is not to suggest that they know or do little taskwork related to crime. Rather, that crime and crime-related knowledge is only one of several domains of knowledge, skills and expertise that we require of them. To illustrate, today, among other things, we expect officers to know how to:

- interpret and understand the behaviours of individuals with autism;
- assist with traffic accidents;
- find lost hikers;
- respond to bear calls³;
- know where to find resources for homeless citizens;
- obtain witness statements from child victims;
- locate missing teens;
- advise community groups on how to reduce local burglaries.

All of the activities, by the way, entail decision-making that involves learning some level of specialized knowledge and procedures. And, once undertaken, have to be documented according to more specialized knowledge and procedures, so that we can ensure that the problem was not only unf@cked, but unf@cked in accordance with rules, regulations and appropriate social norms.

In short, we – as citizens – have problems. These problems are various shades of f@cked up. We are unable or unwilling to unf@ck our own problems, thus we someone or some people to come and unf@ck them. That is the role of police in modern society. Nothing more and nothing less.

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² This happens. I have heard stories. I am not sharing them.

³ Sightings of bear and wild cats in urban and suburban neighborhoods are probably two of the worst calls for service with which Canadian police have to respond. Because local wildlife officials are under-resourced, when conservation officers are not available to dart wildlife, police have to make the judgement call as to whether to shoot the animal. Not surprisingly, some animal lovers are calling for police training in the use of tranquilizers and relocation techniques.

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