

Healing Illinois: Responsiveness to the Obstacles Between Law Enforcement and Black and Brown Communities of Illinois

Morris Jenkins, JD, PhD, Principal Investigator (Lewis University) Victor Wilburn, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator, Lynne M. Chambers, JD, MSW, Director of Field Research, Katelyn Pierre, BS, Nason Lane, BS, and Jocey Reyes, BS, Graduate Student Researchers, of Southeast Missouri State University,

Introduction

The state of Illinois is a northeastern state consisting of 102 counties, most of which are rural and primarily poor. According to the 2021 census, the state of Illinois has a population of 12.6 million inhabitants with a demographic makeup of 70% white versus 30% minority and the majority of its' population residing in urban county regions. While the projected demographic trends suggest population growth reaching 13 million by 2020, the state of Illinois has experienced steady declines in population, particularly among the rural Illinois counties. More specifically, Alexander County has demonstrated some of the highest declines in population (17%) over the past two decades and with the vast majority of that decline being among white Americans. While declining populations and demographic shifts represent a partial picture of community dynamics respective to the state of Illinois, this pattern is consistent with the many states that represent parts of the Mississippi Delta Region of America. According to another report by McClelland (2021), Alexander County is the fastest shrinking county in the United States with the current population falling to around 2000 citizens today. More specifically, both Alexander County (-26.15%) and Pulaski (-10.76) county were among the top 10 counties that lost the largest percent of their population between July 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018 in Illinois (Great Cities Institute, 2019). In consort, there is the problem of declining infrastructure and resources critical to a community (i.e., no hospital, restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations).

The state of Illinois, similar to many states, are experiencing shifts in communities brought on by changing social and economic variables that represent sensitive concerns to the future of the nation. For example, migration trends are changing because of the nation's demands for resources and jobs are changing. While the southern region of Illinois was once known for producing jobs and resources in the areas of coal mining and other industry areas that depended on our rivers and lakes for transportation, these jobs are very limited in the regions as resource needs have shifted for the entire nation. Consequently, the most vibrant regions of rural America are within close proximity to the urban centers of Illinois; a dynamic seen all throughout the United States. In addition, the urban centers of Illinois (i.e., Chicago) are continuing to see small but subtle signs of growth in both population and economic prosperity compared to their rural counterparts. It is also the case that urban centers as opposed to the rural centers of the United States possess a greater proportion of racial diversity and social economic distribution of resources.

When attempting to unpack the source of these regional shifts that have left some communities devastated while others prosperous, many stakeholders, representatives of the community, and certain community officials are left with the task of unmasking the pain that so

many citizens are feeling today. The purpose of this project was to explore the demographics of a small region of southern Illinois (Alexander and Pulaski Counties) and investigate the obstacles of law enforcement and community relations respective to black and brown communities of rural America (McClelland, 2021).

There is a perception that police forces are largely discriminatory. This is a hard perception for police forces to overcome. There are many groups that like the status quo the way it is and will do what they can to keep racial tensions at the height they are at right now. Weitzer, and Touch, (2005) indicate that “While most Blacks and Hispanics want more law enforcement, one leader within the minority community often criticize the police in public, which may reinforce whites’ impressions that minorities are trying to interfere with crime control. When it is all said and done, white doubt of charges of police wrongdoing may be partly rooted in their loyalty to the law-and-order status quo; minority outlook on misconduct, on the other hand, may reflect their desire to gain better treatment from the police.” When there is certain clique in each group trying to lead by deception, and criticize the other side for their beliefs, them that follow and respect that leadership are more than likely to fall in line with their way of thinking without researching to make sure that what they are saying is true or not true. Legewie, (2016) states that “Events strengthen cohesion within the police department and invoke the notion of the police versus black youth. Police increase the use of force against minority groups to mitigate (perceived) threat, retaliate against the offending group, and preserve social order.” The same can be said when talking about the bond among minority groups. This will not change until each side come together to figure out what the real issues are and deal with them.

The relationship between the community, specifically many communities of color, and law enforcement is at best strained and at worst combative. There are many reasons given for this breakdown but much of it breaks down to the continued and dwindling trust that minority citizens have towards certain community leaders and law enforcement representatives; conversely, many community liasions purport that all is being done to ensure consistent and fair treatment of its citizens and to maintain a continued trust in the system of justice and transparency.

O’Shea (1999) examined the urban/rural divide over the issue of community policing. It was determined that generalizability of findings from urban studies are not applicable to rural areas. Brock & Walker (2005) found that “crime problem” was drug related activity as opposed to the violence in urban areas. Studies have found that young Black and Latino youth in both urban and rural jurisdictions had negative perceptions of law enforcement (Holmes, Painter, Smith, 2017 ; Lee, Kim, Woo, & Reysn, 2019; Hagen, Shedd, & Payne 2005). However, there is a potential for improved relations based on the close knit rural towns.

In this paper, we attempted to bring together the impressions of these two community representatives (NAACP representatives and representatives of the law enforcement community) in an attempt to reach common ground and gather impressions of the two groups.

Method

Three interviews were conducted on three law enforcement command officers (2 White males and one Black female). In addition, a community focus group was conducted (4 Black females and 2 Black male participants). Interviews were conducted by trained criminal justice students. The framework for both the interviews and the focus group was a Strength, Weaknesses,

Opportunities, Threat (SWOT) analysis (Zarestky & Cole, 2017; DeSilets & Dickerson, 2008). The questions were focused on the issues related to positive police community relations.

- **Strengths**
What are your own advantages, in terms of people, physical resources, finances?
What do you do well? What activities or processes have met with success?
- **Weaknesses**
What could be improved in your organization in terms of staffing, physical resources, funding?
What activities and processes lack effectiveness or are poorly done?
- **Opportunities**
What possibilities exist to support or help your effort - in the environment, the people you serve, or the people who conduct your work?
What local, national, or international trends draw interest to your program?
Is a social change or demographic pattern favorable to your goal?
Is a new funding source available?
Have changes in policies made something easier?
Do changes in technology hold new promise?
- **Threats**
What obstacles do you face that hinder the effort - in the environment, the people you serve, or the people who conduct your work?
What local, national, or international trends favor interest in other or competing programs?
Is a social change or demographic pattern harmful to your goal?
Is the financial situation of a funder changing?
Have changes in policies made something more difficult?
Is changing technology threatening your effectiveness?

Results from Student Interviewers

After the focus group, we learned about how deeply rooted race and segregation are in today's society. Members of the focus group live in the Southern Illinois area -- a rural area where the majority of the members have lived for basically their entire lives. As the focus group members were growing up, there was a clear, physical divide between where the African American community and the white community lived. Then came the end of segregation, and integration began. However, it seemed that there was -- and is -- separation between white and blacks.

According to the focus group, blacks in this area lived in rural areas or on the Eastern side opposite to the whites who lived on the West side in "suburbs." With the end of segregation came a period of transition where blacks and whites began to switch communities. In other words, blacks began to move into the West side as whites moved to the East side. Over the years, this led to a white flight where whites began to leave the area completely, taking their businesses with them. The effects are seen through the lack of opportunities for individuals and jobs alike and the physical deterioration of the towns.

As far as policing goes, both the focus group and the individual interviews expressed the difference between law enforcement departments in rural areas versus those in cities. Policing in rural areas gives the advantage of developing a more personal level with law enforcement officers with the mentality of everyone knowing everyone. Even though this familiarity is key, the focus group and interviews also demonstrated the desire for more community-based policing. Unfortunately, events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and issues like department budgets are some barriers for more community-engagement activities.

As far as police accountability goes, the focus group conveyed an interest in seeing community involvement within the police hiring process. However, it should be noted that there is a lack of officer applicants. Lastly, the majority of the interviews and focus group support the defunding of the police movement. Nevertheless, as previously noted, law enforcement departments already face budget restrictions and have trouble affording necessary equipment and hiring more officers as it is.

One major difference between law enforcement and community members was the perception of the type of discrimination that is occurring. Both groups agreed that racial discrimination was a problem, especially with police/community relations, however, law enforcement believed it was an individual problem. In other words discrimination occurred because of the few “bad apples.” Community members leaned more towards a systemic discrimination approach and calls for a need to change the culture of the institutions through policy modifications. However, both agreed that some policy changes are needed regardless of whether the problems are systemic or not. There appears to be an agreement of the systemic racism issues in the community at large, employment, housing etc., but law enforcement felt that these systemic issues were part of the culture of policing. “We don’t see Black, Brown or White, all we see is the Blue of our fellow Brothers and Sisters” on the force.¹

Conclusions and Recommendations

Where there is prejudice, whether perceived or real, racism is noted to be the heart of police injustices. There is an uneven amount of minority arrests compared to other racial groups, but this may not be because of racism but more likely due to in the moment situations, decisions that drive police officers to react. Keese (2005) states that “Implicit bias describes the automatic association people make between groups of people and stereotypes about those groups --- stereotypes that even members of the targeted group can internalize. More than three decades of research in neurology and social and cognitive psychology has shown that people hold implicit biases even in the absence of heartfelt bigotry, simply by absorbing messages from the media and world around them.”

One sentiment which came from both constituent groups and that is both groups represent people who are invested in the region and considers this place their home. Both groups have a cultural connection to the region and way of life. They just have to continue to learn to coexist together. This seems to be openly acknowledged but there remains policies, procedures, customs, and traditions that are contrary to that reality. This is the crux of the problem as past behaviors are deeply rooted and difficult to change. Below are a few steps in the right direction:

Some steps to take to combat bias found in police departments:

¹ Chief from one of the localities. This point was echoed by the other police officers.

1. Raise awareness of implicit bias among police leaders and officers.
2. Transform the conversation between police and the community.
3. Put policies in place to limit the impact of bias (Keese 2005)
4. Focus the conversation to reach commonalities within and between the community groups

Everything needs to start from top down. If the ones that are in charge cannot lead by example, then nothing will work. Get out in the community to promote diversification and cohesion, work with our community leaders, raising awareness and cultivating community policing. Show the community that policing is about the crime & discipline not racial biases.

Training and education should include, the use of restorative justice processes, law related education, culturally specific training for both the police and the community.

The joint resolution between the black and brown community and Illinois Law Enforcement should be the foundation for efforts to improve police community relations. NAACP Criminal Justice Committee Chair Robert Moore, and Retired Federal Marshall is available to provide training, and implementation support on the “10 Shared Principals.”

“NOW BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED that we affirm the following principles regarding the relationship between law enforcement and the communities and people they serve in Illinois:

1. We value the life of every person and consider life to be the highest value.
2. All persons should be treated with dignity and respect. This is another foundational value.
3. We reject discrimination toward any person that is based on race, ethnicity, religion, color, nationality, immigrant status, sexual orientation, gender, disability, or familial status.
4. We endorse the six pillars in the report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing.² The first pillar is to build and rebuild trust through procedural justice, transparency, accountability, and honest recognition of past and present obstacles.
5. We endorse the four pillars of procedural justice, which are fairness, voice (i.e., an opportunity for citizens and police to believe they are heard), transparency, and impartiality.
6. We endorse the values inherent in community policing, which includes community partnerships involving law enforcement, engagement of police officers with residents outside of interaction specific to enforcement of laws, and problem-solving that is collaborative, not one-sided.

² Trust between law enforcement agencies and the people they protect and serve is essential in a democracy. It is key to the stability of our communities, the integrity of our criminal justice system, and the safe and effective delivery of policing services. In light of recent events that have exposed rifts in the relationships between local police and the communities they protect and serve, on December 18, 2014, President Barack Obama signed an executive order establishing the Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The President charged the task force with identifying best practices and offering recommendations on how policing practices can promote effective crime reduction while building public trust. This executive summary provides an overview of the recommendations of the task force, which met seven times in January and February of 2015. These listening sessions, held in Washington, D.C.; Phoenix, Arizona; and Cincinnati, Ohio, brought the 11 members of the task force together with more than 100 individuals from diverse stakeholder groups—law enforcement officers and executives, community members, civic leaders, advocates, researchers, academics, and others—in addition to many others who submitted written testimony to study the problems from all perspectives. The task force recommendations, each with action items, are organized around six main topic areas or “pillars:” *1. Building Trust and Legitimacy, 2. Policy and Oversight, 3. Technology and Social Media, 4. Community Policing and Crime Reduction, 5. Officer Training and Education, and 6. Officer Safety and Wellness*. The task force also offered two overarching recommendations: the President should support the creation of a National Crime and Justice Task Force to examine all areas of criminal justice and propose reforms; as a corollary to this effort, the task force also recommends that the President support programs that take a comprehensive and inclusive look at community-based initiatives addressing core issues such as poverty, education, and health and safety.

7. We believe that developing strong ongoing relationships between law enforcement and communities of color at the leadership level and street level will be the keys to diminishing and eliminating racial tension.
8. We believe that law enforcement and community leaders have a mutual responsibility to encourage all citizens to gain a better understanding and knowledge of the law to assist them in their interactions with law enforcement officers.
9. We support diversity in police departments and in the law enforcement profession. Law enforcement and communities have a mutual responsibility and should work together to make a concerted effort to recruit diverse police departments.
10. We believe de-escalation training should be required to ensure the safety of community members and officers. We endorse using de-escalation tactics to reduce the potential for confrontations that endanger law enforcement officers and community members; and the principle that human life should be taken only as a last resort; and

THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we vow by mutual affirmation to work together and stand together in our communities and at the state level to implement these values and principles, and to replace mistrust with mutual trust wherever, whenever, and however we can, and

THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we work collaboratively to publicize widely the adoption of this resolution throughout the state of Illinois.” NAACP, “*Shared Principals.*”

In conclusion, follow-up studies through a joint effort between, law enforcement, the NAACP and institutions of higher education should spearhead evaluation efforts in the next few years (Hansen, Alpert, & Rojek, 2014). These efforts should lead to obtaining of public and private grants to pay for these valuable and relevant efforts. The focus groups for the Task Force on 21st Policing targeted urban areas. A similar approach should target rural areas to examine the differences and similarities of community policing issues in those area, specifically rural areas like Southern Illinois.

It should be noted that these efforts should not occur in a vacuum. Other efforts should be initiated and continue to deal with the issue of systemic racism in the community at large. Also, efforts should take place to improve rural police departments’ concerns and issues as well.

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