



FOUNDATIONS OF GOOD POLICING

Having a clear, comprehensive definition of good policing will help agencies, organizational leaders, and individual officers build a culture of transformational leadership while navigating an increasingly complicated public safety landscape.

Good Policing is Lawful

Those who enforce the law must themselves be bound by it. Officers must operate within the legal boundaries that define police authority and practice. This is not just a technical requirement, it is a foundational commitment to justice and the rule of law.

Lawfulness is the bedrock of policing in a democratic society. It ensures that police authority is exercised within a framework of rules designed to protect individual rights and uphold justice. Lawful policing fosters public confidence and shields agencies from allegations of misconduct and abuse of power. Lawful policing demands not only knowledge of the law, but also a principled commitment to applying it fairly and consistently.

Adherence to legal standards does not automatically equate to good conduct. Lawfulness must be accompanied by moral and ethical commitments that inform not just whether officers can do something, but whether they should.

Good Policing is Legitimate

In a democracy, the People are the ultimate source of government authority. As initially set forth in the Peelian Principles that define modern policing, officers “must recognize always that the power of the police to fulfil their functions and duties is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions, and behavior and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect.”

Legitimacy is how we assess the public's belief in the fairness of the police, community confidence that agencies and officers are using their authority appropriately. Legitimacy is part of the social contract that makes policing possible in a free society. When communities view police as trustworthy and just, cooperation increases and public safety outcomes are improved.

Legitimacy is earned through transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. Good policing requires agency and officer actions to be fair, to prioritize the needs of the community, and to be perceived as doing so by a wide range of stakeholders. Legitimacy requires that agencies and officers see the community not as a passive audience or a problem to be managed, but as a partner and co-producer of public safety.

Good Policing is Effective

Police efforts must also advance the ultimate objectives of the agency and the community. It is about delivering tangible results that enhance the safety and security of the community.

Effective policing is proactive, focused, and measurable—using strategies supported by data and research to reduce harm, prevent crime, and solve problems. It reflects a results-oriented mindset rooted in continuous improvement.

Effectiveness requires strategic thinking and a commitment to evidence-based police practices. Agencies must embrace data, research, innovation, and collaboration with internal and external stakeholders to continuously assess what matters and what works in their community. Being effective also means being adaptable. Social challenges shift, crime evolves, and public expectations change. A high-performing police agency is one that is committed to learning and improvement, constantly refining its methods to meet the moment with agility and purpose.

Good Policing is Efficient

Agencies and officers must make responsible decisions. Every police action has costs. Some of those costs are financial, but others are social, psychological, or practical. Those costs may be borne by taxpayers, by officers, or by individual community members who interact with the police. An efficient approach to policing requires carefully weighing the potential benefits of police action against the associated costs.

Efficiency ensures that resources—time, personnel, funding, and community goodwill—are used wisely. It requires strategic decision-making that considers both short- and long-term impacts. Efficient policing avoids actions that unnecessarily drain resources or erode public trust, and instead prioritizes interventions that deliver the greatest benefit with the least harm.

This is true for individual officers. A decision to stop, search, or arrest, for example, takes time and resources, imposes some costs on the community member, and may affect public trust. It is also true at the agency level. Budgets are limited, staffing is often stretched thin, and officer morale is critical to

effective agency management. Investing in training, community partnerships, or prevention programs may yield better long-term results than more punitive or reactive approaches. Efficiency does not mean cutting corners—it means making strategic and tactical choices that maximize impact and minimize harm.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important for agencies and officers to incorporate all four foundations of good policing? Why isn't it enough for police actions to just be lawful, or legitimate, or effective, or efficient?
2. Applying the four foundations of good policing in the field can be challenging. For example, a police action that is viewed as legitimate by some community members may be viewed as illegitimate by others, and it can be difficult for officers to assess both the positive and negative impacts of their decisions. How would you explain to a new officer how they should incorporate the four foundations of good policing into their professional decision-making?
3. How does your agency use policy, training, and supervision to balance the four foundations of good policing?
4. Describe an example of an officer who did an outstanding job applying the four foundations of good policing. Explain why their decision was lawful, legitimate, effective, and efficient.
5. Describe an example of an officer who prioritized one of the four foundations of good policing at the expense of the others (e.g., a lawful action that was not legitimate, effective, or efficient, or an effective action that was not lawful, legitimate, or efficient). Explain why that officer may have made the decision they did. What would you say to an officer in a similar position to help them make a better decision?

