

The Role of Police in a Free Society

All societies have some system of justice. In modern communities, police play a role in stopping people who harm others and in establishing and maintaining order in emergency situations. Problems arise, however, when people misunderstand the proper role of police in a free society. Let's discuss what should and should not be expected of police.

Essential Functions of Police

Police are to enforce the laws of their jurisdictions just as the lawmakers are to follow the constitutional procedures of their states. Judges are to ensure due process to all those accused of crimes. Ideally, laws are confined to libertarian principles on the use of force: do not harm people or take their property.

Police are trained to stop imminent threats of harm and to interrupt harm in progress. In the course of their duties, they may intercept bank robbers, recover stolen property, or direct traffic safely around an accident scene. They are on call when free citizens witness a crime or emergency.

Government Misuse of Police

Governments can easily be tempted to misuse police. When politicians see police as their own force rather than as fellow public servants, they may seek to use police officers to raise revenue through arbitrary parking restrictions or unneeded speed traps. They may use police as a "show of force" to intimidate peaceful activity (such as arresting pastors for holding a worship service.) Opportunistic political operatives can use police as a scapegoat or a distraction. This is unfair to officers and places them in danger from public resentment and political interest groups. It also endangers the public by diverting police from their core mission of stopping harm to persons and their property.

Government also makes police work more difficult by creating a multitude of laws about trivialities. It is a misuse of police to send them after a man selling an untaxed cigarette to a willing buyer. It is a misuse of police to send them after people with an expired sticker on their license plate. Every

additional law about harmless matters means additional police encounters, with potential dangers to life and liberty.

Public Misunderstanding of Police

The public may expect police to perform functions that are not part of their job. Police are not a replacement for parents, teachers, or psychologists (although skill in any of those areas could prove helpful in a tactical situation.) Nor are police officers omniscient. The officer responding to a hostage situation or mass shooting does not know if the perpetrator is schizophrenic, a jihadi, or simply evil. The officer is responsible for ending the threat; he/she is not responsible for the life story that led the perpetrator to that moment.

Respect and Boundaries

Police in a free society guard the boundaries defining individual rights. They do not interfere in peaceful activities, but come when we call if someone is assaulting us or stealing our property. They are a tool of representative government to be used to serve the public: to serve, not to subdue.

When everyone understands the proper roles of police and the boundaries of their function, everyone is safer—including the police. When we expect police to be superhuman or when politicians use police in a political manner, we are all in danger—including the police. The libertarian principle of respect for individual rights, when exercised by most citizens, means police can focus on their mission.