

Encyclopedia of Community Policing and Problem Solving

Metropolitan Police Act of 1829

Contributors: Pamela M. Everett

Editors: Kenneth J. Peak

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England's Metropolitan Police Act of 1829 (the "Police Act") resulted in a new police force and law enforcement practices that were revolutionary in the history of law enforcement. Sir Robert Peel drafted and introduced the Police Act in response to serious crime problems and social disorder in London in the early 1800s, and in doing so, he had to delicately balance the strong historical sense of English personal liberty with the need to prevent crime and enforce the criminal laws. Peel's Principles, as articulated in the Police Act, had an important historic effect on policing in the United States and, in particular, community policing as it was conceived and as we know it today. This entry provides information on the history of the Police Act, Peel's Principles, the act's implementation, its role as arguably the earliest form of community policing, and its effect on community policing in the United States then and now.

History of the Police Act

Necessity is often the mother of invention, and London in the early 1800s was in dire need of something to control runaway crime rates and related [p. 244 ↓] social disorder. But the historical context in which the Police Act was introduced and ultimately passed is more complex than simple crime rates of the day, and the broader historical backdrop explains why Peel sought such a revolutionary change in law enforcement and why the Police Act had such a profound effect on policing in England and later in the United States.

As far back as the late 13th century, policing in England had traditionally been a community responsibility, rooted in the concept of liberty and the subjects' obligation to keep the King's peace. Crown-appointed, unpaid justices of the peace maintained law and order by directing local city, parish, or borough constables, and even when those arrangements proved lacking or inefficient, as they were by the mid-18th century, Englishmen of all classes were reluctant to consider further empowering government through a stronger police force. So the parish constable system would remain the English policing mainstay until events dictated otherwise; and with that system came significant problems, many of which are somewhat legendary.

Of particular relevance to community policing was the constables' lack of support from the citizens they policed; most viewed the officers as a dangerous representative of the Crown who surely intended to threaten personal liberties. As a result, when a constable put out the "hue and cry" to summon help with a criminal, people rarely offered assistance. In many cases, they vocally criticized the constable and almost cheered on the criminal suspect. Understandably, many constables preferred to turn a blind eye to criminal activity rather than incur the wrath of their fellow citizens.

Nightfall brought on a whole new set of problems. Criminals could move about more stealthily in the dark, but even if they had to operate in more visible locations, the night watchman was usually in a pub instead of out patrolling or maintaining his street lamps. And if the constables ever actually pursued a criminal, the lawbreaker found safe haven by simply crossing parish boundary lines. Constables did not assist their counterparts in adjoining jurisdictions and information did not flow across borders, so criminals safely moved to another section of town if and when a parish constable had discovered their operations.

As a result, wealthy citizens hired private guards and the poor turned to "thief takers," former constables who knew how to find stolen property and could work with thieves to get the property back. Inevitably, thief takers, like the infamous Jonathan Wild, capitalized and withheld some of the recovered property as profit for their services. Some even hired thieves to steal and then made a profit offering their services to recover the stolen goods.

But the citizens involved in law enforcement eventually changed before the whole of policing did. As the Industrial Revolution created more economic opportunities, the gentry (who were typically tapped to serve as justices of the peace) and men of lesser means simply could not afford to spend time maintaining law and order. Instead, it made much more economic sense for them to hire others to stand their posts and watches. Unfortunately, most of the men who were hired were available and willing because they were the least fit for the job. They were poor and susceptible to bribes and other criminal incentives. And as the poor became poorer, alcohol consumption increased and along with it, disorder and vice. Crime rates soared and the criminal law expanded to include more than 200 offenses punishable by death. But Londoners continued to

fear increased government involvement and instead continued citizen police watches in their respective communities.

The first significant departure from this historical law enforcement model was in 1749 when the novelist Henry Fielding was appointed as magistrate for Bow Street in London. Fielding arrived just as crime rates were especially high and seemingly unstoppable. In response, he and his brother, Sir John Fielding, set up a modestly paid detective squad called the Bow Street Foot Patrol, also known as the Bow Street Runners (the Fieldings also established the Bow Street Horse Patrol to keep order on the highways leading into London). The Fieldings encouraged property owners to pay annual fees that could be used to fund the investigation and pursuit of robbers and other criminals. Through these privately paid fees (and continued government inaction), Londoners were still in control of local law enforcement, and despite efforts at reform in the ensuing years, the Bow Street Foot Patrol remained the only significant policing development until the early 1800s. While the Bow Street Police Office was a major improvement on the old parish-constable system, its administrators and officers could not possibly keep pace with the [p. 245 ↓] runaway crime rates of the day. Sir John Fielding saw yet another opportunity for police reform and he again led the call for change, most notably the proposed Act of 1773.

In response to a rash of burglaries and robberies in Westminster and London in late 1769 and early 1770, a committee was formed to investigate. Fielding presented the committee report to Parliament in 1770, explaining that there was an insufficient number of watchmen, who were inadequately paid but overburdened with duties. He noted that each parish answered to a separate director who defined local beats without consulting with neighboring parishes, leaving dangerous gaps in police coverage and confusion about jurisdiction. The committee also reported on how ineffective watchmen were often retained because it was too difficult to replace them.

Fielding's report included several important resolutions, including a call for a central authority to oversee all constables and watchmen; a new system of appointing and discharging constables; and specific regulations to govern constables, watchmen, and beadles. The Act of 1773 was passed but it failed to provide for central control and applied only to Westminster. While it provided for a night watchmen minimum wage and an apparently much-needed rule that prohibited watchmen from visiting alehouses

while on duty, by all accounts it changed little in the field, and major reforms remained necessary while the status quo continued.

Lawmakers and citizens were jolted from their apathetic slumber in 1780 when the extremely destructive mob violence known as the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots took place in London. The police force was wholly ineffective and military troops had to be called in to avoid further destruction. The House of Commons and House of Lords even took up the issue, but ultimately, the effect of the riots would fade and people calling for criminal justice reform found few interested listeners.

Just five years later in 1785, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger introduced a bill to establish a citywide police force in London. He cited the jurisdictional boundary problems with the parish system and explained how criminal activity moved through the city unchecked. Lawmakers defeated the bill, again fearing infringement on personal liberties and a military-type police presence. But Pitt had educated English statesmen on the need for reform and his blueprint for a citywide force became the model for the Royal Irish Constabulary in Ireland, where Sir Robert Peel served as chief secretary from 1812 to 1818 (an experience that would influence his view on policing and his design of the Police Act).

The next major reformer on the London scene was Patrick Colquhoun, who aggressively called for improved police organization and criminal law reform. He was appointed a magistrate in London and immediately undertook a thorough study of law enforcement there. In 1795, Colquhoun anonymously published *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, in which he estimated that more than 50,000 London residents were habitual criminals. Colquhoun was primarily concerned with property protection at a time when crime was on a fast and furious rise in a city of 990,000, and with only 1,000 constables and watchmen to police 8,000 streets. He also noted that the police were under the direction of 70 different trusts, each operating in its own ward, parish, or borough, and most underpaid and often associated with known criminals. A centerpiece of Colquhoun's reform proposals was a central authority to oversee police operations.

Then in 1800, Colquhoun published another treatise calling for a specific law enforcement jurisdiction on the Thames. He posited that criminal activity would eventually destroy a metropolitan city that relies on trade and commerce for its

livelihood. That same year, the Thames Police Act provided for a police jurisdiction that crossed parish boundaries and encompassed the river and its adjacent land. And for the first time, Londoners saw effective policing. But the Thames Police Act was extremely limited (geographically and legally), and Colquhoun's proposals for broader reform went nowhere.

History would repeat itself several times after Colquhoun's failed efforts. The Luddite riots beginning in 1811, the Corn Laws riots in 1815, and the Massacre at Peterloo in 1817 all brought the frightening inefficiencies of the police back into sharp relief. During and after each crisis, lawmakers, reformers, and concerned citizens called for change, but each time and for a variety of reasons, efforts fell short. The police's inability to keep order was again on full display during the funeral procession for Queen Caroline in 1821, and shortly thereafter, rather than consider legislation to reform policing, [p. 246 ↓] the chief magistrate at Bow Street was dismissed. But help was on the way. Later that same year, Sir Robert Peel was appointed to the Home Office, where he first tackled the criminal law, abolishing the death penalty for more than a hundred offenses, condensing more than 130 statutes dealing with larceny into one comprehensive law, and dispensing with the requirement that victims of sexual offenses offer certain proofs at trial.

But police reform was still a high priority for Peel, and as the economic and political situation in London began unraveling in 1825 (by 1828, one person in every 383 was a criminal and 12 of London's parishes with more than 20,000 residents had no night police whatsoever), Peel knew he could not delay his proposals any longer. In 1828, he commissioned a select study on policing and his report of its findings (which confirmed much of what he already knew and had previously proposed in Ireland) met with the usual opposition but also with some limited approval. This response, coupled with absolutely desperate times in terms of crime and social disorder, opened the door ever so slightly for Peel to move boldly—and he did.

In 1829, Peel introduced the Police Act—"A Bill for Improving the Police In and Near the Metropolis"—by noting that crime rates had increased 55% in London and Middlesex in the period between 1821 and 1828, and yet the population had increased by only 19%. He did not believe the increased crime rate was because of the depressed economic conditions but rather blamed a lax and inefficient police force. He pushed preventive

policing—regular patrols by uniformed officers, gathering intelligence on criminal activities only, and centralization of all law enforcement operations within the London metropolitan area. (In a shrewd political move, Peel excluded the ancient City of London from the reach of the Police Act, which helped limit opposition—the City would later adopt the Police Act’s provisions once their utility was proven outside the City.) Both houses of Parliament passed the Metropolitan Police Act and the Crown assented on June 19, 1829.

Peel succeeded where others had failed in large part because he understood that in pushing police reforms, he would have to assuage the fears of most countrymen as well as influential people like jurist William Blackstone and writer William Paley, all of whom still viewed a police force as a threat to constitutional liberties. Englishmen—statesmen and otherwise—constantly referred to the French police as a prime example of the dangerous ends to which police reform could lead. The French were notorious for using widespread intelligence networks not only for crime fighting but to spy on and apprehend government detractors. Peel knew he would have to distinguish his proposed reforms from the French model and to assure opponents that his plan was not perched atop a slippery slope that would inevitably lead to the French situation. Peel was masterful in finding middle ground and proposing moderate reforms based on fundamental principles that would change policing forever.

Peel’s Principles

According to Peel, the basic mission for which the police exist was to prevent crime and disorder, and that mission could only be served by observing and complying with the following tenets:

- The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent on public approval of police actions.
- Police must secure the willing cooperation of the public in voluntary observance of the law to be able to secure and maintain the respect of the public.
- The degree of cooperation of the public that can be secured diminishes proportionately to the necessity of the use of physical force.

- Police seek and preserve public favor not by catering to public opinion but by constantly demonstrating absolute impartial service to the law.
- Police use physical force to the extent necessary to secure observance of the law or to restore order only when the exercise of persuasion, advice, and warning is found to be insufficient.
- Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.
- Police should always direct their action strictly toward their functions and never appear to usurp the powers of the judiciary.
- The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with it.

Implementation of the Act

One thousand new police officers took to the streets of London on September 29, 1829. Their uniforms were the first indication that this police force was different, or at least intended to be different, and not just military troops in sheep's clothing. Officers wore top hats and a blue suit with brass buttons on the coat that said "Police." They were unarmed at first, but would later be allowed to carry birchwood clubs called *truncheons*.

Peel wanted more than window dressing though. He believed that retired noncommissioned army officers with good character certificates would make the best recruits, and he would demand men of the highest moral character. Still, to avoid temptations and keep officers from cozying up too closely with the residents on their beat, officers were drawn from areas outside their patrols. Those officers who were natives were assigned to patrols as far away as possible from their home neighborhoods. Peel wanted the bobbies to be viewed as representatives of the state and the police commissioners.

But even the right uniforms and strategic beat assignments could not convince the masses that this new arrangement would turn out well. The criticisms and complaints

were immediate (“raw lobsters,” “Peel’s Bloody Gang,” and “Blue Devils,” were among just a few of the epithets of the day), and Peel knew his force would have to win public approval to succeed. Peel also knew that his officers could only win public approval with good character and civil conduct, both of which were closely supervised. Between 1829 and 1831, 8,000 men joined the force, and more than 3,000 of them were discharged for unfitness, incompetence, or drunkenness. As officers focused on preventing crime and maintaining civility with their communities, public opposition slowly but surely waned, and in 1834, a Select Committee reported that crime rates for violent offenses had declined and detection of more minor crimes had increased. Sir Robert Peel had finally brought meaningful police reform to England.

Influence on Community Policing in the United States

The Police Act and Peel’s principles were bound to be popular and influential in the United States simply because they were so effective. But because American social conditions in the mid-1800s— disorder in the form of food riots, wage protests, for example—were so similar to the chaos in London that preceded Peel’s reforms, the Police Act’s influence was even greater and Peel’s principles were an almost perfect fix for the law enforcement issues in the United States.

Those issues were most prevalent in the major U.S. cities, which were much like London in the early 1800s, limping along with the old constable-watch system, trying to retain a more informal approach to social control and avoiding any encroachment on civil liberties. Like Londoners, Americans were deeply suspicious and guarded against any government-directed law enforcement agency, and especially one that might bring a military presence to urban life.

But informal neighborhood controls like the constable-watch system simply could not keep pace with growing urban populations, and with the everincreasing demarcation—geographically and otherwise—between the rich and poor. Those same social conditions were spawning more formal, bureaucratic responses to a variety of problems like health and welfare, so the time was ripe for municipalities to address the crime

problem at the same time they were tackling issues like fire protection and sewage. Reformers urged lawmakers and bureaucrats to follow the London model in spirit and practice, while keeping ever-mindful of the differences in American and English life. As a result, newly established police departments in mid-1800 America adopted many of Peel's principles and practices but designed original innovations that were responsive to political and social conditions in their respective cities.

Like their English counterparts, the new American police officers were dedicated to preventing crime and disorder. They wore formal uniforms and set out on foot patrols to provide a professional presence in their communities, among the people.

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Although officers here enjoyed broad discretion (rather than having their powers strictly codified and subject to the rule of law, as was the case in London), officers were expected to exercise their discretion consistently with the values and norms in the communities they patrolled. That discretion very often translated into physical force and a unique form of street justice for the lower classes and petty criminals. But the control and authority that patrol officers wielded was a welcome change to the middle and upper classes and municipal leaders, all of whom were desperate for order after the chaotic constable-watch years. Because municipalities were addressing social welfare issues at the same time, city leaders could support the police in their efforts by providing shelters for the homeless, ostensibly leaving only the more hardened and disorderly lower classes to be formally policed. That support and cooperation between the police and city leaders would ultimately get a bit too cozy, leading scholars to identify the period as the political era of policing, but the cooperative nature of the relationship had its foundations in Peel's principles and the Police Act.

When community policing was formally adopted in the United States in the 1970s to 1980s, Peel's influence was evident. Community policing programs around the country brought back foot patrols and the long-term beat assignments that fostered relationships between officers and the community. The community policing approach emphasized Peel's mission of maintaining order, with officers striving to be polite and respectful in their interactions with citizens, further enhancing the police-community relationship.

Community policing proponents would also focus on falling crime rates as evidence of effective policing, just as Peel had done so many years before.

See also [Broken Windows Theory](#); [Citizen Patrols](#); [Community Policing, Evolution of](#); [Directed Patrol, Studies of](#); [Foot Patrols](#); [Generations \(Three\) of Community Policing](#); [Police-Community Relations](#); [Policing, Three Eras of](#)

Pamela M. Everett

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