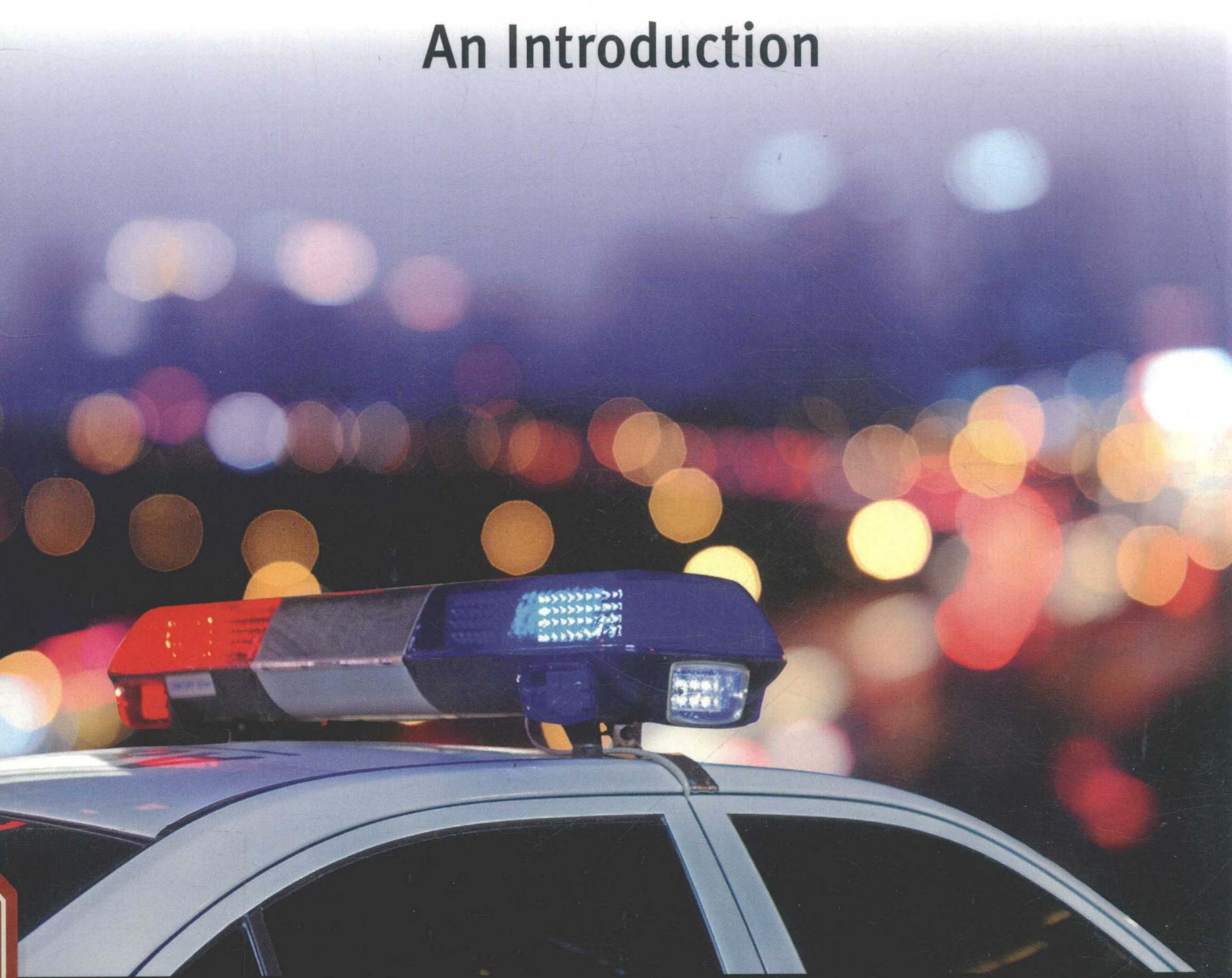


CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERIES

Willard M. Oliver

# POLICING AMERICA

An Introduction



Wolters Kluwer

Aspen College Series

# Policing America: An Introduction

**Willard M. Oliver**  
**Professor of Criminal Justice**  
**Sam Houston State University**



**Wolters Kluwer**

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The wicked flee when no man pursueth,  
but the righteous are bold as a lion.

—Proverbs 28:1

Inscribed on the National Law Enforcement Officers  
Memorial wall  
Washington, D.C.

This book is dedicated to the men and women of law enforcement who have given the ultimate sacrifice of devotion: their lives in the line of duty.

A special dedication goes to the most recent officer killed in the line of duty as of the completion of this book:

Sheriff's Deputy Darren Goforth  
Harris County (Texas) Sheriff's Office  
47 years old with ten years of service  
Assassinated  
End of watch: August 28, 2015

A portion of the proceeds from this book will be sent to the National Law Enforcement Officer's Memorial Fund to honor these men and women.

## PREFACE

This book was written with the benefit of having taught and conducted research on policing for the past 20 years, and having served as a summer police officer, a large metropolitan police officer, and retiring as a military police officer. It is that combination of education and practical experience that I hope to be able to communicate in this textbook *Policing America: An Introduction*.

The variety of perspectives, however, made for somewhat a challenge in trying to determine how to approach this book. Having served as a police officer, I understand that the police officer is a street-level bureaucrat and is instrumental in shaping what is American policing. This is because police officers still retain the fairly wide ability of discretion, and what happens on the street, what police officers do, has a powerful impact on the police department, and it drives the organization. Therefore, the police officer's perspective, even when it differs with either police management or research, should never be overlooked.

Research also serves a purpose in helping us to gain an insight into American policing by giving a bird's-eye view into commonalities between and amongst the more than 18,000 police agencies and approximately 800,000 law enforcement officers. It also, sometimes, gives us new insights into the actions of individual police officers and their departments. It cannot, however, always provide a contextual understanding of American policing because of the many limitations inherent in research methods.

Another perspective into American policing comes from police administration and management, because they are the people who run the police organizations, and what they do and how they see things is critical to understanding what police departments and police officers do. However, while their perspective is important, when they steer the police organization it is often like steering a big ship with a very small rudder.

That last notion also makes an assumption that is not always true in American policing, and that is we are dealing with large bureaucratic organizations. Most of the police departments in America are small-town and rural agencies employing under 20 police officers. Still further, not all police agencies are police departments, but many are composed of offices of the sheriff, marshal, and constable. What may prove true for the large metropolitan police department may not hold true for the small-town police chief with a force of three officers, or the sheriff's office with five deputies.

Still another perspective on American policing is the fact that when we talk about these agencies, they are mostly local and municipal, yet sheriffs' offices serve at the county level, and there are also state and federal agencies as well. We assume these police agencies are all the same. Sometimes those assumptions are wrong.

One other perspective that must be pointed out, which is not represented in this book, is the fact that policing in America is very different from policing in the rest of the world. Most other countries have one police department that operates geographically throughout the country but reports to the highest executive authority. American policing is far more decentralized. Therefore, this book is very American-centric out of necessity. Rather than detailing an international or comparative perspective, the book focuses on American policing in the cities, town, and counties, as well as local, state, and federal levels.

In order to achieve an understanding of American policing, all of these perspectives are incorporated into the book. The focus of the book is on a contextual understanding of concepts in American policing. It is supported by the academic research, balanced with the voice of the American police officer. Additionally, when addressing matters that pertain largely to police administration, the book attempts to balance the research with the voice of the administrator as well. The ultimate goal of this textbook is to provide a balanced understanding of policing from an academic perspective without losing sight of the realities of policing as performed by the men and women of law enforcement who do this job every day. It is the reader who will judge if I have achieved this goal.

**Willard M. Oliver**  
**Huntsville, Texas**



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# SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xxi</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xxiii</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>xxv</i>

<b>Chapter 1</b>	Policing	3
<b>Chapter 2</b>	History	29
<b>Chapter 3</b>	Agencies	59
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Organization	93
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Careers	123
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Authority	157
<b>Chapter 7</b>	Discretion	189
<b>Chapter 8</b>	Culture	215
<b>Chapter 9</b>	Strategies	241
<b>Chapter 10</b>	Patrol	277
<b>Chapter 11</b>	Investigations	303
<b>Chapter 12</b>	Force	329
<b>Chapter 13</b>	Accountability	359
<b>Chapter 14</b>	Stress	389
<b>Chapter 15</b>	Issues	417

**Chapter Quizzes** 449

**Glossary** 483

**Index** 511

**Photo Credits** 523

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	xxi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxiii
<i>About the Author</i>	xxv

## Chapter 1: Policing 3

<b>Police</b>	7
<b>Policing in a Democracy</b>	9
<b>Police and Government</b>	12
<b>Police and the Criminal Justice System</b>	16
<b>Police Purpose and Function</b>	19
<b>Conclusion</b>	22
<i>Just the Facts</i>	23
<i>Ask Yourself</i>	24
<i>Keywords</i>	24

## Chapter 2: History 29

<b>Societies and the Development of the Police</b>	30
Bands	31
Tribes	32
Chieftdom	32
State	33
<b>The English System of Policing</b>	33
The Sheriff	35
The Thief-Takers	36
Bow Street Runners	36
The London Metropolitan Police	37

<b>The American System of Policing</b>	<b>40</b>
The Political Era (1830–1930)	41
The Reform Era (1930–1980)	45
The Community Era (1980–2001)	48
The Security Era (2001–present)	50
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>52</b>
<i>Just the Facts</i>	53
<i>Ask Yourself</i>	53
<i>Keywords</i>	54

## Chapter 3: Agencies 59

<b>Local Police</b>	<b>62</b>
Large Metropolitan Police	62
Small-Town and Rural Police	65
Special Jurisdiction Police Agencies	66
County Sheriff's Office	71
Other "Local" Police	74
<b>State Police</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Federal Law Enforcement</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>85</b>
<i>Just the Facts</i>	86
<i>Ask Yourself</i>	87
<i>Keywords</i>	87

## Chapter 4: Organization 93

<b>Government Organization</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Police Bureaucracy</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Police Organization</b>	<b>106</b>
Personnel	107
Functions	109
Area	110
Time	112
<b>Police Leadership and Management</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Police Organizational Theories</b>	<b>117</b>



**Conclusion 118***Just the Facts* 119*Ask Yourself* 119*Keywords* 120**Chapter 5: Careers 123****Individual 125****Recruitment 127****Pre-Employment Standards 129****Screening 132****Training 140**

Police Academy 141

Field Training Officer Program 143

Other Training 144

**Probation 146****Career Development 146****Retention 150****Retirement 150****Conclusion 151***Just the Facts* 151*Ask Yourself* 152*Keywords* 153**Chapter 6: Authority 157****Crime and Disorder 160****Police Department 161****Community 163****Government 171****The Law 172**

Criminal Law 173

Civil Law 175

Constitutional Law	176
Administrative Law	182

**Conclusion 183**

*Just the Facts* 184

*Ask Yourself* 185

*Keywords* 185

## **Chapter 7: Discretion 189**

**Police Discretion 191**

**Police Decision Making 195**

Organizational 196

Environmental 199

Situational 200

Individual 203

**Limits on Discretion and Decision Making 205**

**Conclusion 208**

*Just the Facts* 208

*Ask Yourself* 209

*Keywords* 210

## **Chapter 8: Culture 215**

**Culture and Subculture 217**

**Themes of the Police Culture 221**

Language 222

Danger 225

Authority 227

Solidarity 228

Death 230

Humor 233

**Conclusion 235**

*Just the Facts* 235

*Ask Yourself* 236

*Keywords* 237

## Chapter 9: Strategies 241

### Police Strategy Studies 242

The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment 244

Kansas City Rapid Response Study 245

RAND Criminal Investigation Study 245

### Broken Windows Theory, Model, and Policing 246

### Community Policing 249

### Problem-Oriented Policing 254

### Targeted Policing 259

### Data-Driven Policing 262

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design 262

Pulling Levers 263

Evidence-Based Policing 263

Predictive Policing 264

### Compstat 264

### Homeland Security and Policing 266

### Conclusion 271

*Just the Facts* 271

*Ask Yourself* 272

*Keywords* 273

## Chapter 10: Patrol 277

### Patrol Equipment 279

### Patrol Types 281

### Police Patrol Deployment 286

### Targeted Police Patrol 290

### Community Policing Patrol 295

### Conclusion 296

*Just the Facts* 297

*Ask Yourself* 298

*Keywords* 298

## Chapter 11: Investigations 303

**The RAND Study Revisited 307**

**Police Criminal Investigations 309**

**Investigative Organization 311**

**Investigative Process 314**

**Investigations Issues 317**

**Conclusion 322**

*Just the Facts 323*

*Ask Yourself 324*

*Keywords 324*

## Chapter 12: Force 329

**The Realities of Force 329**

**Use of Force 332**

**Deadly Force 340**

**Officer Safety 346**

Line of Duty Injuries 347

Line of Duty Deaths 349

**Conclusion 352**

*Just the Facts 352*

*Ask Yourself 353*

*Keywords 354*

## Chapter 13: Accountability 359

**Misconduct 362**

**Corruption 366**

**Brutality 370**

**Accountability 371**

Internal Control 372

External Control 376



**Conclusion 383***Just the Facts* 384*Ask Yourself* 385*Keywords* 385**Chapter 14: Stress 389****Stress 390****Types of Stressors 391**

External Stress 393

Personal Stress 395

Operational Stress 396

Organizational Stress 398

**Consequences 399****Stress Reduction 406****Conclusion 409***Just the Facts* 410*Ask Yourself* 410*Keywords* 411**Chapter 15: Issues 417****Political—The Police Should Reflect the Community They Serve 419****Economic—The Unintended Consequences of Fiscal Constraints 424****Social—The Ferguson Effect 430****Technology—Body Cameras 434****Conclusion 439***Just the Facts* 440*Ask Yourself* 440*Keywords* 441**Chapter Quizzes 449****Glossary 483****Index 511****Photo Credits 523**