

The typical citizen would feel that the police were remiss in their duty should they fail on their own initiative, or refuse on legal grounds, to investigate by questioning a person who was lurking in the neighborhood for no apparent reason. The disturbed citizen would expect the police to discover whether the suspect was armed and, if so, to disarm him and prosecute him should it be discovered that he was carrying the weapon illegally. Should the suspect refuse to explain what he was doing in the neighborhood, and the policeman apologized for questioning him and then went about his duties leaving the suspect to continue his lurking, the citizen would consider that he was not receiving a fair return on his tax investment for police services.

The typical citizen is surprised when he discovers that in many jurisdictions police arrest privileges are so carefully circumscribed by statutory and case law as to render the policeman virtually powerless to deal effectively and safely with situations that confront him almost hourly during his duty tour. The police action demanded by the citizen from his protector is illegal in many jurisdictions.

The police, under local control as in our form of government, are inclined to provide the protection their citizen-employers demand; otherwise the police fail to prevent crime and are subject to sharp criticism for their failure to protect the public. Also, since they usually act with courtesy, discretion, and good judgment, only infrequently is the legality of their acts questioned, and then by a citizen who fails to understand and appreciate the police motive or by a lawyer who uses the incident in the defense of his guilty client.

The discrepancy between what the people expect the police to do and what the police are privileged to do in protecting public peace and security results principally from a lack of understanding of the police purpose and of what the police must do to accomplish it.

The police must accept some blame for lack of public confidence in the means they use to achieve their purpose. Police abuse of their authority must be eliminated, not by withdrawing essential authority or by freeing the guilty criminal, but by raising police standards to a level of trustworthiness and by some action which will penalize the community that employs an officer who abuses his authority.

Police leadership has been dilatory in raising service qualifications and ethical standards. However, the police now have an acceptable code of ethics and their qualification standards are being raised from coast to coast. Each local community should insist on improvement in the quality of its police service until all have achieved professional status. The community that is penalized for abuse of arrest privileges will be likely to demand both higher standards and disciplinary action against the offending officer.

Lack of public understanding of the police purpose and what the police must do to accomplish it is accentuated by two circumstances that tend to cast the police in the role of agents bent on unnecessarily oppressing freedom. The first grows out of police responsibility in the enforcement of traffic and other regulatory laws sometimes violated by the most conscientious citizen, an enforcement that alines good citizens against the police. The other is ignorance of the facts involved in the war against crime in a free society. People are apt to fear and hate what they do not understand—and the hate is often stimulated by traffic violation experiences.