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THE IMPACT OF POLICE COMPASSION COMPETENCY

WHITE PAPER

Ari Cowan¹

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Abstract — Violence degrades the quality of human life throughout the world. It consumes resources, time, and energy that could be applied to solving the world's problems and increasing the quality of human life. A punitive approach to the problem of violence is a common response and is perhaps the most widespread. This approach has its roots going back more than 10,000 years. New developments in understanding human behavior suggest that alternative approaches may be more effective in reducing the morbidity and mortality associated with violence. One alternative, The Violence Integrative Prevention and Restoration (PAR) Model, provides an evidence-based, effective, successfully demonstrated, and compassionate approach to violence response and prevention built upon a public health foundation. It is a significant departure from the traditional "punitive" model for dealing with violence. The international application of the PAR Model is explored in this paper.



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From Warrior Mentality to Compassion Competency

Compassion is the basis of all morality.

— Arthur Schopenhauer
1788 – 1860
German philosopher

The shift from a “warrior mentality” to a compassion competency driven police culture is essential in light of emerging developments in the American criminal justice system, public concern about abusive policing practices, and the need for more effective law enforcement. The keys to integrating a compassion competency in police departments fall into two general categories:

- Structural changes within the department, including updating policies, procedures, and practices as well as implementing support and incentive programs.
- Training programs that build practical, applicable, and effective compassion competency skills.

This paper focuses on skill-building through compassion competency training. Research by Helen Wang, Andrew Fox, et al at the University of Wisconsin suggests that, not only can compassion skills be developed through training; they can also produce results that benefit those receiving the training as well as co-workers, and those they deal with professionally.²

In a Stanford University study, researchers Hooria Jazaieri, Kelly McGonigal, et al, found that compassion training “increased mindfulness and happiness, as well as decreased worry and emotional suppression.”³

Compassion has also been successfully used with Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs). A study by Brian A. Chopko from Kent State University reveals creative applications of compassion paired with the warrior mindset produces innovative and effective CIT results.⁴ The application of these strategies to those members of the public facing mental health challenges demonstrates the importance of compassion as a threat-reducing and effective situational management tool.

Compassion training provided by the International Center for Compassionate Organizations incorporates emotional intelligence components. Developing emotional intelligence is crucial in police work because emotional perception, understanding emotions, and emotional regulation are keys to situational awareness, understanding, and effective conflict management.⁵ Emotional

“...not only can compassion skills be developed through training; they can also produce results that benefit those receiving the training as well as co-workers, and those they deal with professionally”



intelligence can be measured, thus facilitating evaluations of the impact of compassion training.⁶

Target Goals and Outcomes

The goals for establishing a police compassion competency include:

- Increased engagement and productivity of staff and sworn officers.
- Strengthened ability to retain officers and staff.
- Increased success in recruiting high quality candidates.
- Increased job satisfaction.
- Enhanced community relations and public perception.
- Enhanced public cooperation.
- Lowered incidence of lawsuits against a department for wrongful death, excessive use of force, and other claims of abuse.
- Reduced disability claims within the department.
- Decreased paid sick days and medical leave of absence days.
- Improved citizen participation to improve safety and the quality of life of everyone in the department's jurisdiction.
- Strengthened support for budgetary requests.

Compassion as a value and practice in police departments, when effectively applied, offers opportunities to assist officers to:

- More effectively manage conflict and defuse tension.
- Demonstrate grace when encountering conflict.
- Improve self-management of stress, frustration, and anger.
- Move from a destructive judgmental situational stance to a more neutral public health stance when dealing with conflict.
- Improve public perception of the professionalism, caring, and efficacy of the department and its personnel.
- Strengthen the relationship between the department and the citizens they serve.
- More successfully rally support when confronted with challenging situations.
- Increase confidence, job satisfaction, and sense of accomplishment.

Increasing Law Enforcement Efficacy

Professionals in law enforcement settings deal in relationships: relationships with citizens, criminals, officers of the court, activists, supervisors, and each other. Ideally, these officers provide moral, ethical, and social leadership rooted in the rule of law, justice, and fairness. When this form of leadership is present, trust, the cooperation of all stakeholders and respect are manifest.

The result is effective service and protection.

“... departments with excellent records can be negatively impacted by the recent disclosures of police abuses which have nothing to do with their organizations.”



However, the absence of this type of leadership — real or perceived — subverts departmental efficacy, public support, recruiting efforts (especially when unemployment is low), and other necessary elements of police effectiveness. Even departments with excellent records can be negatively impacted by the recent disclosures of police abuses which have nothing to do with their organizations. Department personnel can develop a “siege mentality” and experience significant reductions to their prosocial behavior.⁷ Officers can become withdrawn, resentful, cynical, overly cautious, and hostile.

The establishment of a department-wide compassion competency addresses these challenges and includes programs to reorient officers as well as validate their professionalism, concern, expertise, and benefits to skeptical communities.

Reducing Officer Cynicism and Burnout

Mike Force, the Lake Saint Louis Police Department Chief of Police (Lake Saint Louis, Missouri) writes:

The burden of dealing with tragedies associated with the day-to-day duties by police officers often remains unspoken and follows the officers into their off-duty and personal lives. Failure to recognize and provide an acceptable outlet for the disappointment and frustration felt by officers at the end of their shifts can lead to alcohol abuse, problems with personal relationships, self-rejection, disillusionment, and even suicide.⁸

Chief Force goes on to explain that law enforcement leaders can make a positive impact by:

1. **Promoting compassion** — leading with compassion which, in turn, provides a model for others in the department. “Compassionate leaders generate energy in others because they resonate, empathize, and connect with them.”
2. **Understanding compassion** — building a compassion competency and practicing compassion as well as “kindness, thoughtfulness, and courteousness.”
3. **Sharing information about compassion** — including compassionate acts by officers and teams, media coverage about compassion, and formal acknowledgement of those demonstrating compassion. Compassionate action by department personnel should also be shared with the media.
4. **Managing compassion fatigue** — supervisors and commanders should be trained to recognize compassion fatigue and to respond effectively to it. Untreated compassion fatigue can lead to a dispirited attitude among those who come in contact with someone feeling “burnt out.”

“The burden of dealing with tragedies associated with the day-to-day duties by police officers often remains unspoken and follows the officers into their off-duty and personal lives.”

Countering Negative Police Stereotypes

In an article in *The Atlantic*, author Jamil Zaki reports that “a recent string of brutal arrests by officers in Missouri, New York, Texas, South Carolina, Ohio,



and elsewhere has helped to drive the public’s faith in law enforcement to a twenty-two-year low. National confidence in police officers’ racial impartiality has also fallen.”⁹

In an article appearing in *The New Yorker* — “When Cops Choose Empathy” — author Jamil Zaki examines the pervasive police environments in which “many recruits are steeped in a so-called warrior mentality, in which routine patrols resemble combat and citizens pose a potentially mortal threat.”¹⁰

This side of police work is brought into sharp focus via the media and the number of abuses that have become top stories in the news. There needs to be a shift from “combatants within a community to guardians of it.”¹¹

“Research suggests that implementing compassion competency training can significantly reduce the risk of lawsuits and fines: it’s very inexpensive risk insurance.”

Departments in Los Angeles, Seattle, Cleveland, New Orleans, Baltimore, and other cities have come under federal investigation. Settlement costs are significant, with payouts from New Orleans (\$10 million), Seattle (\$5 million), and Albuquerque (\$4.5 million) serving as eye-opening examples.¹²

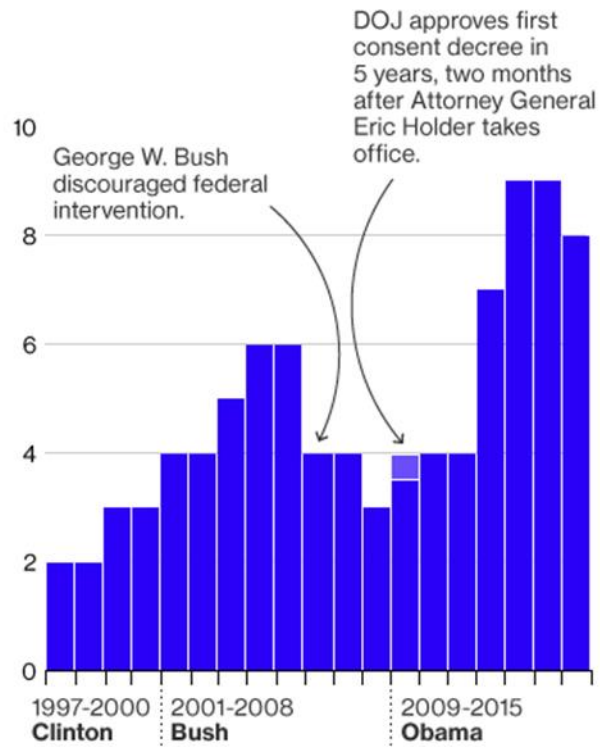
The graphic to the right¹³ illustrates the growing involvement of the US Department of Justice in taking up public concerns with police conduct. The historical growth in interventions suggests that this trend will continue.

However, research suggests that implementing compassion competency training can significantly reduce the risk of lawsuits and fines: it’s very inexpensive risk insurance.

Former Madison, Wisconsin Police Chief David C. Cooper comments:

Police leaders and their officers need to be integrated strongly with the community. Police cannot be seen as an outside para-military force to keep community members in line. Police officers need to police with consent of those affected if we are to ever have peace and safety in our

Figure 01
Number of Open Consent Decrees by Administration



Source: Department of Justice; Clearinghouse.net; Marshall Project reporting; Bloomberg reporting



cities. This begins when police are seen as compassionate and thoughtful actors in our urban landscape. When police overcome the four obstacles I identify in my book: anti-intellectualism, violence, corruption, and discourtesy, they will then be able to move forward.¹⁴

Compassionate action by police officers can generate press coverage. For example, a group of local police officers in Dayton, Texas were hailed as heroes when they helped a hungry, dehydrated, and ill homeless man — going well beyond the call of duty to help. They coordinated their efforts with local agencies to find shelter, food, and clothing for the man.¹⁵

This type of behavior — in this case, covered by the press — counteracts the corrosive stereotypes of stories of police abuse.

The behavior also has political implications. For example, during her presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton said that, if elected, she would strengthen federal oversight of police.¹⁶ Attracting populations having concerns with police abuse is becoming more alluring to those seeking office.

Improving Citizen Cooperation and Support

“We’re in a bad place right now for police officers in our country. What’s at stake is the trust, the respect and the basic overview of how our citizens view police officers.”

The Camden (New Jersey) County Police Department has initiated a program designed to improve officer and citizen safety, lower threat levels, and develop emotional intelligence.¹⁷ Scott Thornton, Camden’s police chief comments: “We’re in a bad place right now for police officers in our country. What’s at stake is the trust, the respect and the basic overview of how our citizens view police officers.”

Respect for the rule of law, police, the courts, and political institutions are essential to maintaining a healthy and productive society. Abuses by police, injustice in the courts,¹⁸ and political corruption undermine the efficacy of police officers, as well as their safety. Departments building a compassion competency are producing results that counter the trend toward disrespect for law enforcement.

Citizens are less likely to cooperate with police if they are fearful that officers will bring harm to them, are untrustworthy, or are unjust in their application of the law. From cooperating during investigations to supporting department budgets (via the officials they elect), loss of respect is a major threat to departments and their public safety mission.

Improving Community Relationships

As discussed earlier, police officers provide a necessary leadership role in the communities they serve. They also can act as living examples of healthy power and exemplary conduct. This injection of demonstrated healthy behavior provides



critically needed models for those in communities challenged by crime and its antecedents.

Police officers are also educators. Many departments have community liaison personnel and offer public and school programs. Among other topics, these programs are directed toward personal safety, information about laws that are particularly germane to the officers' audiences, drug abuse, and citizen responsibility (e.g., driving courtesy, proper use of the 911 service, using bike lanes, neighborhood watch, texting while driving).

There are important opportunities to assist those in communities where crime is pervasive. Training select department personnel as Professional Compassionate Community Trust Leaders (CTLs)¹⁹ can result in three principal outcomes:

1. Community CTL officers can train members of the community on how to effectively deal with and defuse conflict, thus reducing some of the precursors to criminal behavior.
2. The presence of CTL officers sends a strong message of caring and commitment to the community.
3. Communications about such programs inform the public and counter unfair negative perceptions about departments and their officers.

Those drawn from the ranks for this mission will necessarily have strong leadership qualities, high emotional intelligence, and good communication skills.

The International Center for Compassionate Organizations has been training community members and educators as Compassionate Community Trust Leaders.²⁰ The results have been positive.²¹ This role can easily be assumed by police personnel.

A police CTL program can help reduce crime, build community relationships, and counter unfair negative perceptions about departments and their officers.

Increasing the Attractiveness of Careers in Law Enforcement

There are many aspects of police work that are attractive to those currently engaged in a law enforcement career as well as those considering entering the profession. There are also significant inhibitors to recruiting and maintaining a qualified workforce. Inhibitors include:

- Increases in the loss of public respect for police due to media focus on abuses.
- Negative perceptions of a number of specific police departments (e.g., Ferguson, Baltimore, Seattle). These perceptions are often generalized to include other departments and policing in general.
- Concerns about leadership efficacy.
- Apprehensions about departmental environments.

The stress and frustrations of police work can be daunting. If a department has poor leadership and management, this will add to the adverse impact on recruiting and retaining highly qualified officers.



Employees in a broad range of organizations are seriously questioning their work environments. A Gallup survey reported that 71% of employees are either not engaged or are actively disengaged at work:²² they are “going through the motions.” This is a serious indictment of organizational structure and many in leadership positions who are not much more engaged than their employees.²³

The cost to the American economy is enormous. Gallup estimates that disengagement costs between \$450 billion and \$550 billion annually.²⁴

Police departments are not exempt. As one police chief commented:

Changing how an organization is perceived and how officers respond to problems is challenging for a chief in the best of circumstances. This is especially true when the department has a strong yet dysfunctional culture. With increased levels of turnover, leaders can better initiate the embedding and reinforcing factors necessary to effect positive change.²⁵

Two keys to decreasing turnover and increasing recruitment ease and efficacy are:

1. Effective departmental leadership.
2. A dynamic, rewarding, and meaningful environment.

Development of a department-wide compassion competency can help build both of these characteristics. A compassionate approach can lower stress, foster innovation, increase loyalty, and improve relationships between police departments and the communities they serve.^{26 27}

*A
compassionate
approach can
lower [officer]
stress, foster
innovation,
increase
loyalty, and
improve
relationships
with
communities.*

Resistance in Departmental Culture

*The difficulty lies not so much in developing
new ideas as in escaping from old ones.*

— John Maynard Keynes
1883 – 1946
British economist

William Young, a Professor of Organizational Behavior at Indiana Wesleyan University, notes:

The key is getting to the cause of resistance. People do not inherently resist change. Instead, they resist what they perceive as losses associated with the change. This is a distinct difference. Common perceptions of loss associated with change include the following:

- Loss of status: will the change cause a reduction in title, seniority, rank, or responsibilities?
- Loss of money: will the change affect on-or off-duty incomes?



- Loss of comfort level: will the change create an uncomfortable environment?²⁸

Developing a compassion competency also requires:

- Learning new skills.
- Dropping some old practices, some of which some officers favor and/or have developed a high level of proficiency.
- Changes in how officers see themselves and their jobs.

Change can be threatening — it represents moving from the certainty of an existing personal and organizational identity to one that is unfamiliar and untested.

The challenge is to address the resistance issues, show the benefits of developing a compassion competency, and provide reassurance throughout the process.

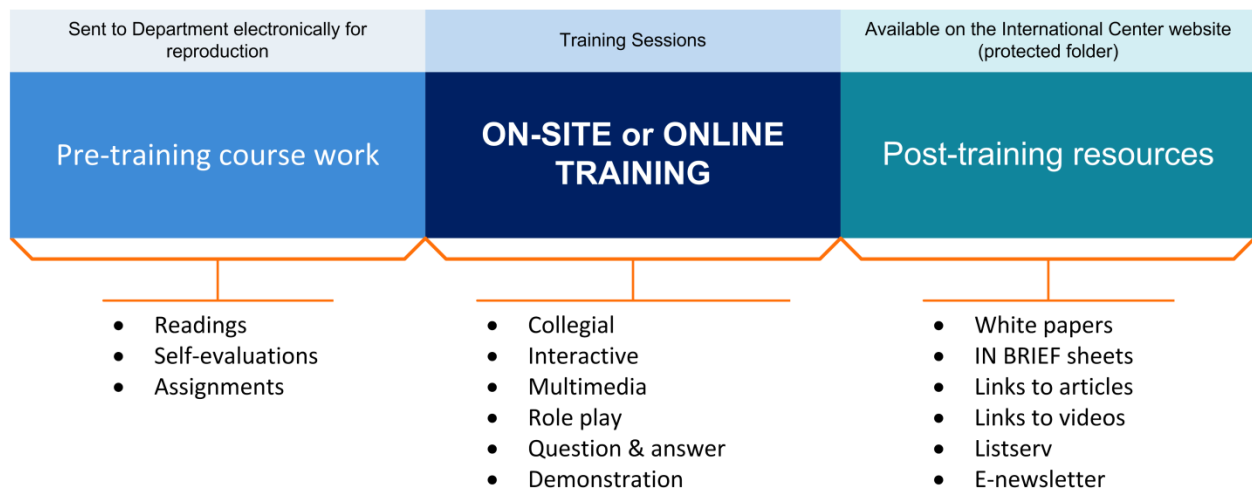
Applications

Developing a compassion competency requires training in three areas:

1. Emotional intelligence.
2. Practical compassion.
3. Compassionate conflict management.

The nonprofit, public health, and public service International Center for Compassionate Organizations approach provides one example. International Center trainings take the general form illustrated in the graphic on the following page.

Figure 02
ICCO Approach to Police Compassion Training





The International Center curriculum is divided into three tracks:

1. Emotional intelligence training — all sworn officers.²⁹
2. Compassionate conflict management training — all sworn officers.
3. Professional Compassionate Trust Leader training — for community relations personnel and/or select officers working with community organizations and leadership.

The efficacy of this training is amplified if members of the community are also provided with the skills from these three tracks. Ideally, the department serving the community will be the proactive source for developing these skills.

Research is a necessary component of developing a compassion competency program, providing baseline, intermediate, and long-term assessment of program efficacy as well as the impact on communities and public perception. Research should be conducted by reliable independent sources.

A Final Note

A well-trained, compassionate, and competent police department bestows effective, valuable, and meaningful benefits upon those they serve and those who are doing the serving and protecting.

Additional Information

The International Center for Compassionate Organizations has resources that provide additional information on compassion-related topics including White Papers, In Brief (single page) materials, and reference materials. For more information, please contact the International Center at:

mail@compassionate.center

Additional information is also available on the International Center website at:

<https://compassionate.center/par>

About the Author

Ari Cowan is the Director General of the International Center for Compassionate Organizations. For his work to end violence, he was awarded the 1998 National Public Health Award from the United States affiliate of the international physician organization that received the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize. More information about Mr. Cowan can be found [online](#).



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Notes

- ¹ The narrative and illustrations for this paper are from the theoretical work, writings, and graphic conceptualizations of Ari Cowan. They are Copyright © 2019 by the author and are reproduced with permission.
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- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
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- ¹⁸ One example is the growing concern with respect to plea bargaining, where as many as 95% of convictions are driven by this process — one in which critics say is manipulative and unjust.
- ¹⁹ Compassionate Trust Leader Training has three variants: Compassionate Community Trust Leaders (serving communities), Compassionate Professional Trust Leaders (serving select populations — professionals such as educators, police officers, social service personnel, and social advocates), and Compassionate Organizational Trust Leaders (serving those within their organization). The International Center has conducted successful trainings in each of these variants.



WHITE PAPER

The International Center for Compassionate Organizations

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- 29 The International Center would work with a group such as the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence to provide emotional intelligence training for police departments.