Society for the Anthropology of Work • Policing and Labor

Police Discretion Under Pressure: On the Criminogenic Potential of Organizational Reform

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Published on: Dec 01, 2020

DOI: 10.21428/1d6be30e.a76f702b

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Following the wave of Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the United States earlier this year, debates about policing were also reignited in Norway. A number of commentators reflected on the education that all police officers in Norway receive at the Norwegian Police University College, which sets the Norwegian police apart from its counterpart in the United States. This education includes training in the Norwegian criminal justice system and laws, but it goes far beyond that. It also critically engages with the role of the police in society, providing insight into the lives of vulnerable groups and engaging with perspectives from sociology, criminology, and psychology. The program builds on a policing tradition of restraint, in which the police are to be [reserved in their use of force](#) and use professional discretion, understood as making the best possible judgment based on training and experience, in day-to-day police work. This tradition of restraint is embedded in the Police Act, which emphasizes that [means of least strength](#) should be used first.

This inclusive, welfare-oriented, and nonpunitive tradition stands in contrast to the more militaristic tradition rooted in continental Europe and the United States, which is characterized by secrecy, hierarchical lines of command, and risk management. Here, the goal is the elimination of threats to the body politic with little emphasis on professional discretion or restraint. While both traditions claim to be knowledge-based, what is considered a valuable form of knowledge differs. Where the former valorizes research-based education, practical experience, and local, cultural, and contextual forms of knowledge, the latter treats knowledge as intelligence to be acted upon, largely disconnected from the individual policeman.

However, there are early signs that Norway is moving toward a more militaristic culture of policing. A key marker on the road to militarization has been the decision to approach the police's knowledge base as *intelligence-led* and *data-driven*. The 2014 [Police Intelligence Doctrine](#) proposes a knowledge pyramid, where data constitutes the cornerstone that is processed into information and then analyzed to create an intelligence product. The logic of intelligence disregards the individual knowledge and professional judgment of police officers; rather, intelligence is used strategically to inform decisions and, crucially, to manage and govern police work. The move toward intelligence-led and data-driven policing introduces a new form of knowledge at the expense of professional discretion and, as such, stands to transform the Norwegian police.

This transformation, however, has to be understood in the context of organizational reform informed by right-wing politics. The consolidation of the police's knowledge base went hand in hand with a strong geographical centralization: the number of police districts in the country was reduced from fifty-four to twenty-seven in 2002, and from twenty-seven to twelve in 2016. Both centralization and datafication break with the police's traditional role, where broad contact with and in-depth knowledge of the public was considered a value in itself. But this traditional role is now colliding with

the pure efficiency thinking that instrumentalizes data-driven knowledge and reduces the purpose of the police to fighting quantifiable instances of narrowly defined crime. These intertwined processes define the contours of a qualitative transformation of the Norwegian police. They represent worrying tendencies that, when brought to their logical conclusion, may result in a structurally criminogenic environment both within the police forces and in society. For the purposes of this essay, we allow ourselves to draw out the extreme versions of these opposing logics as they become progressively more visible. We also position these shifts as an effect of the introduction of neoliberal reforms inspired by New Public Management (see Hood 1991): that is, focused on cost effectiveness and driven by the imperatives of privatization and audit.

Under the current right-wing government, the Norwegian Police University College has been targeted for funding cuts and downsizing, which could in the worst-case scenario lead to [the loss of accreditation](#). Meanwhile, the so-called Proximity Police Reform of 2015 resulted in a more distant, centralized, and standardized police force—in spite of what the measure’s name would suggest. Police stations have been closed, the doorbells have been removed on the district buildings that are still in use, and it is very difficult for the public to get in touch with the police without calling one of the twelve Operations Centers across the entire country.

The idea is that the Operations Center can best prioritize assignments due to its panoptic overview. Yet the problem is that the Operations Center no longer knows or understands the local context because it now covers large areas. The Operations Center centralizes intelligence and withholds patrols from what its personnel takes to be lesser missions, in order to have sufficient resources in case something more serious arises. Police patrols register data into the Indicia data system, which is then analyzed and recontextualized, forming the basis for decision-making and prioritization by the Operations Center. The police are thus forced to sit in their cars and wait. The traditional police patrol, grounded in professional discretion, has thus been redefined as aimless and meaningless. This strongly top-down management from the Operations Center makes police officers question the value of their education since they are, in practice, not allowed to make decisions at work and feel robbed of their professional discretion. It also alienates police forces in other ways, preventing them from gaining relational and geographical knowledge that used to be common and highly valued. These managed forms of distancing generate disillusionment both among the police and the public. Where the police are prevented from acting according to their best judgment, and where “less serious” calls for help are dismissed outright, criminogenic conditions can be expected to take shape.

The recent reforms thus implemented New Public Management ideals through the restructuring of the organization, introduction of ever-proliferating performance indicators and targets, and data-driven “knowledge products” that embody the positivist rationality of quantification and disregard context, quality, and professional discretion in the name of accountability. Recycling Taylorist ideas of

scientific management, new technological products promising to streamline policing or even predict crime have become particularly seductive, resulting in a form of “digital Taylorism” (Gundhus, Talberg, and Wathne 2019) as the new ethos of police management. The aforementioned Police Intelligence Doctrine, introduced in 2014, was also framed as a new business model where data-driven methods and intelligence products would contribute to more objective, evidence-based decision-making in keeping with a focus on “quality reform.” Decontextualized and aggregated data, pertaining both to crime and to policing activities themselves, were thus to serve as the basis for decisions.

In 2015, the Norwegian Board of Technology advised the Norwegian police to start testing predictive technologies, arguing that “a knowledge-based police force that works proactively and preventively is better than a reactive police force that responds to incidents after they have occurred” (Teknologirådet 2015: 16). This signified a shift toward a preemptive logic of Norwegian policing (see Andrejevic 2017; Egbert and Krasmann 2019). Data becomes a new basis for the exercise of power by the police, but also by police management over individual officers. The standardization of information retrieval is also in line with the desire for tighter management of police personnel in the name of cost efficiency.

This drive toward data-driven management has to be understood in the context of the increased influence of [consulting firms](#) and private security actors on the police forces. The government’s [latest white paper](#) on the police opened the door to further outsourcing of some core police tasks to private security companies. Geographical centralization, sharpening of strategic focus, and centralization of knowledge all go hand in hand with neoliberal modes of governance, which emphasize the privatization and outsourcing of (previously core) police tasks. The increasing influence of technology companies and their data products also should not be underestimated here. Technology, as has been shown time and again, is far from neutral; to the contrary, it comes with built-in notions about management, crime, and risk (see Joh 2019).

Such technologies have to be understood as a form of governance and power, as they shape everyday police work, define priorities, and emphasize only that which lends itself to quantification and measurement at the expense of that which is often more important but unquantifiable. Trade unions and the police as workers have been rendered powerless vis-à-vis the introduction of (third-party) management systems, despite the direct impact of these technologies on their work conditions. While the introduction of these technologies should in theory be a subject of negotiation within a Norwegian model of workplace democracy that emphasizes codetermination and worker participation (Wathne 2018), because these technologies are framed as neutral they are not negotiated over. Digitalization largely takes place with the help of IT consultants in closed arenas and is framed as an unquestioned good for the entire organization.

We can thus observe a form of privatization whereby the police hire private companies to carry out police tasks, while some tasks that the police have traditionally taken care of are no longer regarded as

public responsibility. This leads to a privatization of these problems; some citizens have the means to buy security services, while others do not. New security actors, including criminal actors, can then insert themselves into this politically created vacuum. In sum, neoliberal reforms, evidence-based and data-driven management, and the wider logics of audit and risk culture are reshaping police work and transforming the organizational culture of the police. The resulting move toward increased militarization of the Norwegian police is hence an effect of politically driven reforms and choices, which in turn give rise to both alienated police and declining trust among the public.

These developments are, in our view, criminogenic in two senses. First, they result in a police increasingly distanced from the community, forced to “hit targets” and more likely to “juke the stats,” thus embracing the instrumental rationality demanded by an organizational structure that progressively limits the scope for professional discretion (Wathne 2020). As working conditions worsen, many feel that this organizational structure prevents them from doing their job according to their best judgment. The “relational” aspect of policing becomes less important as the militaristic approach takes hold and the Other is increasingly objectified, perceived through the lens of threat and risk. The ultimate consequence of this alienation could become a rise in aggression within the police force and police violence.

But the effects of restructuring are also criminogenic in a second sense. The absence of the police in certain areas as a result of centralization not only negatively impacts the perception of legitimacy and levels of trust vis-à-vis the police and, by extension, the state, but can also offer a fertile ground for non-state criminal actors, such as gangs, vigilante groups, or outlaw motorcycle clubs, to position themselves as ad hoc security actors as they fill the gap created by the neoliberal state. While this is not as yet the case in Norway, we know that this has been precisely the effect of similar reforms in other parts of Europe (Kuldova 2019). While Norway can still boast of low levels of crime and an educated police force, we should not become blind to the long-term dangers of politically driven organizational reforms and the security vacuum they create. Norway is not yet “there,” but the tendencies we have observed in our research give us reason to worry.

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Preview Image

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