

**Comparison of Former FBI Director Comey's Speech at Georgetown University and the PEW Research Center Report Entitled "Behind the Badge"**

In 2015, former FBI Director, James Comey, addressed Georgetown University on the prevailing topic of "Law Enforcement and Race Relations." In 2017, the PEW Research Center published a report entitled "Behind the Badge," which focused on multiple key issues, including how police view their jobs, along with an examination of fatal encounters between the police and people of color. In comparing Director Comey's speech to the PEW report, we find portions of compliment, as well as contradiction. By analyzing these resources, we gain a context of the most salient issues regarding the relationship between the police and the communities they serve.

As Director Comey powerfully stated in his speech, "we are at a crossroads in our nation and there is a clear disconnect between the police, and the citizens they serve."<sup>1</sup> Director Comey stated that historically, law enforcement enforced the "status quo" and as a result, certain groups received unfair treatment.<sup>2</sup> Director Comey spoke of how negatively Irish immigrants were treated 100 years ago. The dynamic which we are facing today involves the perceptions *of* the police, and the perceptions *by* the police, specifically in communities of color. Director Comey spoke of the fact that on his desk he kept an FBI search warrant to wiretap Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's. phone. The warrant, lacking fact and substance, was approved simply because there was an allegation of "communist influence in the racial situation."<sup>3</sup> Although this occurred nearly sixty years ago, it is evident that the tensions between the police and communities of color is real, which is why it is a common theme found within both informational sources.

Findings from the PEW report indicate that officers feel that their job is now riskier from the high-profile fatal encounters between the police and people of color. As a result, officers feel greater tension and are reluctant to perform their duties.<sup>4</sup> Key high-profile cases involving Michael Brown, Freddy Gray, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, and Laquan McDonald became known nationwide. As a police chief at the time of all those incidents, I can attest to the fact that the profession felt an enormous strain. Self-initiated activity was down, hesitation to apply appropriate force when required was up, and tension between the police and minority segments within our community was palpable.

Statistics from the PEW report found that 93% of officers now worry more about their safety, and due to increased tensions between the police and persons of color, 72% of officers are “less willing to stop and question suspicious persons.”<sup>5</sup> This is unfortunate because as Director Comey stated, “law enforcement attracts those who want to do good.”<sup>6</sup> The PEW report further supports this, indicating that 96% of officers are committed to making their agency successful.<sup>7</sup>

Director Comey stated that through much effort, the police were able to ameliorate problems of violence in high crime neighborhoods, such as in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. As evidenced however by the 2014 cold-blooded assassination of NYPD Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos in that same neighborhood, much more must be done for the police and the public to see each other more clearly.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the PEW report stated, “although the police recognize the dangers of the job, the majority believes that the public does not understand.”<sup>9</sup> The public however largely feel (83%) that they *do* understand, thereby illustrating a clear disconnect.<sup>10</sup>

The PEW research report found that two-thirds of officers believe that the fatal encounters (as cited herein) which prompted the national demonstrations, are “isolated incidents and not signs of a broader problems between the police and communities of color.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Director

Comey stated that there is an “unconscious bias in the white-majority culture and that police react differently to whites than they do to persons of color.”<sup>12</sup> In further contrast, Director Comey stated that the “lack of role models, education, decent employment, and opportunities for persons of color, lead them to inherit lives of crime and prison.”<sup>13</sup> The PEW report however indicates a contradiction to this, finding that 92% of white police officers feel that our country has made the necessary changes required to guarantee equal rights for persons of color.<sup>14</sup>

The most impactful and universal theme from both Director Comey’s speech and the PEW report is that we as the police must intensify our efforts to eliminate biased and prejudicial actions on our part. Likewise, this must be done while continuing to build relationships with our communities so that they better understand our duties and challenges.<sup>15</sup> As Director Comey stated, citizens must see that officers are working to keep them safe and citizens must provide the respect and space needed for officers to properly perform their jobs. When this happens, the public will likely see officers as “doing the right thing for the right reasons.”<sup>16</sup>

As the PEW report cited, the police and the public often see the world very differently and this disparity is what is skewing the perceptions of both groups.<sup>17</sup> Sir Robert Peel, the father of modern policing, said it most eloquently in 1829 through his nine “Peelian Principles.” Specifically, principle number seven states that “the police are the public and the public are the police.”<sup>18</sup> By this he meant that the safety and welfare of the community is everyone’s responsibility and we must all work together for our collective good. For the necessary improvements to occur, we must collaborate and bridge the gap of perception so that mutual respect and understanding becomes the foundation from which we all operate. When this happens, the police and their respective communities will both greatly benefit.

## Sources Cited

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<sup>1</sup> Law Enforcement and Race Relations Speech: 1m50s; Comey, James Dir. FBI (former) Georgetown Univ. 2015

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 4m15s

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 5m30s

<sup>4</sup> PEW Research Center Report, "Behind the Badge"; Morin, R; Parker, K; Stepler, R; and Mercer, A: January 2017

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Law Enforcement and Race Relations Speech: 7m30s; Comey, James

<sup>7</sup> PEW Research Center Report, "Behind the Badge;" Morin, R; Parker, K; Stepler, R; and Mercer, A: January 2017

<sup>8</sup> Law Enforcement and Race Relations Speech: 16m50s-17m40s; Comey, James

<sup>9</sup> PEW Research Center Report, "Behind the Badge;" Morin, R; Parker, K; Stepler, R; and Mercer, A: January 2017

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Law Enforcement and Race Relations Speech: 6m15s; Comey, James

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 11m11s-11m33s

<sup>14</sup> PEW Research Center Report, "Behind the Badge;" Morin, R; Parker, K; Stepler, R; and Mercer, A: January 2017

<sup>15</sup> Law Enforcement and Race Relations Speech: 14m08s; Comey, James

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 14m58s-15m35s

<sup>17</sup> PEW Research Center Report, "Behind the Badge;" Morin, R; Parker, K; Stepler, R; and Mercer, A January: 2017

<sup>18</sup> Crime Mapping and Analysis News, a Police Foundation Publication; "Policing on Purpose: Revisiting Problem-Oriented Policing"; Fritz, Noah J Issue # 3 <https://crimemapping.info>