

Critical Issues of Practical Police Work

What can we learn from failures and from criminals

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Having worked as a police chief in Vienna, it is amazing what one can learn through practical experience. Professor Dr. Graßberger, a famous criminologist at the University of Vienna educated us: **“From whom can we learn, if not from criminals”**. He was both a researcher and practitioner. He was very interested in interviewing criminals to learn whose homes they broke into or how they committed other crimes. Working in the police for over thirty years I appreciated that his theory was really very useful.

In the Major Crime Bureau, my first job was dealing with auto-thefts. It was a steady fight against the advance of technology. Car producers invented methods to provide the car owner with new safety features to guard against the theft of their cars. The organized criminals overcame these challenges very quickly and invented new methods to steal these protected cars. Through the decades it was a competition between the car industry and criminals. What did we do in the department of auto-theft? We tried to learn from the criminals, whom we arrested, how they managed to steal cars – in other words, we were educated by the criminals.

Later on as an expert in the field of counterfeiting and white collar crime. The same experience. Police had to learn from the counterfeiters and white-collar criminals how they operated and we, including the money printers or credit card firms studied the activities of criminals to overcome their innovative techniques to cheat them.

As chief of the Major Crime Bureau and heading it for almost 15 years, lessons had to be learned out of mistakes and failures which happened in dealing with criminal cases. Normally investigations are carried out by small teams of four to six criminal investigators. The work of such teams can be controlled more easily than dealing with alarming cases where the whole population of a city or the whole country is aroused and the police are under pressure to find quick and efficient solutions. In my time acting as police chief we were confronted with the dramatic case of a serial killer, killing children and a young woman between 1988 and 1990, serial killers killing more than 30 elderly people in a hospital between 1989 and 1990, and another case dealing with a serial killer who killed 11 women in Europe and America in 1991.

These cases convinced me of the idea:

“What can we learn from our failures?”

Analysing our police work it had to be recognized that in all these spectacular cases, mistakes occurred. Meeting researchers and studying “Cold case management” you become aware that these failures happen not only in our organization, they happen everywhere. New methodology of teaching

As first step, it seems to be rather easy to teach theoretical and practical aspects of police work. You teach the legal framework, rule of law, fields of expertise and confront students with examples of practical police work.

A second step is to establish working groups and to get students discussing practical examples, what works and what doesn't work. They discuss among themselves, playing the role of criminals and using police ideas and strategies of aggression and social defence.

A third step in teaching issues of practical police work will be to become critical about what is going on in case management and what we are able to learn by analysing failures. It was very realistic for the students to watch television reports about the FBI activities in the 9/11 attack in America. They reminded me very much of the problematic situation in our cases, mentioned above, dealing with an enormous amount of information, not knowing which ones are important and which are not important, confronted with a number of suspects, not knowing who was really involved in criminal activities, confronted with alibis not knowing, if they are correct or false and with forensic material, not knowing if it was examined correctly or not. A dramatic Austrian case which was reported throughout the world shall show very impressively what we can learn:

The Amstetten case of “Fritzl” – what went wrong, which failures or mistakes were made by official authorities? In April 2008 a tragic story was uncovered in Lower Austria, Amstetten. A man, father of seven children, sexually abused his daughter more than 24 years had seven children with her and closeted his “second family” away in a cellar next his home. He told the authorities that his daughter had run away at the age of eighteen. Three children of his daughter were found next to the entrance of his house and educated by his original family. Nobody became aware what was going on, neither his family, the neighbours, or the official authorities of Amstetten nor did the police became suspicious about the fact that the daughter of Fritzl was missing and that three children of hers were brought to his home. If you analyse which failures happened it is really very simple to understand that basic mistakes of the responsible authorities led to this tragedy.

A well designed course shall offer the opportunity to teach students through case studies, to learn by failures, what can be avoided in practical work and what are the critical traps that happen in similar situations.