
Observations on the Making of a Police Officer

Peter Moskos

Like most graduate students, I entered the Ph.D. program pretty clueless. Because I love cities, I wanted to study something urban related. In sociology, that generally means race, education, or immigration. I'm not certain exactly when I started thinking about police as an academic field, but something odd was happening in 1995, my first year of sociology graduate school at Harvard. Crime was plummeting, and nobody knew why.

As an undergraduate, I learned the party line on crime. "Root causes" were to blame: poverty, racism, inequality, and deficiencies in education, housing, and health care; guns made the problem worse, and drug addicts needed to be "treated." Police, when they were mentioned at all, were at best only tangentially related to crime. At worst, police were a malign force of racial and class oppression. The job of police, then, was to arrest offenders and not be brutal or corrupt. Since the late 1960s, these attitudes were espoused by virtually the entire academic field.

In graduate school, I began reading scholars like Michael Tonry and Peter Manning, both of whom (just two among many, I should add) insisted that crime could not go down unless society addressed the root causes. While I was

reading their excellent works, the root causes were not improving. And yet crime *was* going down. Between 1990 and 1995, murders in New York City dropped 50% (in the rest of nation the drop was closer to 5%). Police were doing something in New York, and it seemed to be working. Criminology was in the midst of a Kuhnsian "scientific revolution." If all of academia was wrong about police and crime prevention, I figured this was a great field to get into!

Reading more of the literature, I discovered that noted police scholar John Van Maanen—who went through the Seattle police academy in the late 1960s as a participant observer—was just a few blocks away at MIT. George Kelling and David Kennedy were teaching a class at Harvard's Kennedy School. Police ethnographer Maurice Punch lived outside of Amsterdam, where I had lived tending bar at my brother's comedy theater after I graduated from college.

It was in Amsterdam, in 1998, that I started my police research because, unlike in the United States, police in most of the civilized world are generally open to academic researchers. Though little of published substance came from my extensive research in Amsterdam, I learned about policing in general and also the fun of participant-observation police research in particular. I saw a more European approach to police, crime, and drugs that shaped my worldview. Later, I like to think, this early research made me a better police officer.

P. Moskos (✉)
John Jay College of Criminal Justice,
New York, NY, USA
e-mail: mail@petermoskos.com

Initially, my Ph.D. dissertation plan was to copy John Van Maanen and write about the socialization of police. In discussions with him, we agreed that a replication/follow-up study was well overdue. Having gained access in Baltimore, I would follow a police academy class for 6 months in the police academy and then 6 months on the streets. I had little idea what I was getting into, much less what to expect or what I would find. Since I had conceived no formal hypothesis to prove or disprove, my committee and I agreed on a “grounded theory” approach, which, at least as I understood it, was a way to avoid pesky theory before starting my research. Though I didn’t yet know it, what I was planning was an ethnography.

Jump to Baltimore, Wednesday, October 27, 1999, the first day of my fieldwork. I met with Major Kojack, the commanding officer of the Baltimore City Police Department’s Education and Training Division, better known as the police academy (names that are not public record have been changed). The major was friendly to me, but pointed out that we probably wouldn’t speak again because of “chain of command.” There were four ranks between trainee and major. He joked that the only reason trainees usually entered his office was to be kicked out of the program.

I thanked him and proceeded to the quartermaster’s office and picked up my trainee uniform and equipment, bundled unceremoniously in a black garbage bag. I wrote in my notes (emails and field notes have been slightly edited to correct grammar and typos):

I get everything but the badge. I wish I were more into uniforms for their own sake, but the hat does look kind of snazzy. And the handcuffs, of course, have limitless potential. The academy starts Friday morning, at 7:39 a.m. No, not 7:40, but 7:39 a.m. Awfully early for a late sleeper like me.

Friday, 2 days later, I was in the academy wearing my police shirt and khakis, the seemingly universal uniform of police academies. When the class members were asked to stand up and say why they wanted to be police, it was with extreme nervousness when I admitted, as required by the IRB (the internal review board or human subjects committee), that I was a Harvard graduate student conducting research. But the sky didn’t fall. A few moments later, the first class—a

brief primer on the three elements of the criminal justice system (which was interesting to me because I had never taken an introductory criminal justice class)—began. Next, we ran to the gym to learn how to march in formation, which I found “very goofy, but kind of fun to learn how to stand at attention, left face, right face, about-face, parade rest, and salute. What it has to do with police work, I have no idea.”

Then, with the command of “Trainee Moskos: front and center!” I was called out of formation and taken to Major Kojack’s office. I figured this couldn’t be good. It wasn’t. The major told me he had orders from a Colonel Daniels to pull me from the program.

“Do you know why?” I asked.

“No,” Kojack said. “Chain of command.”

I had never heard of Colonel Daniels. I thought perhaps his first name was Colonel. He was, in fact, the acting police commissioner. Perhaps I should have known this, but I was new to the city, and this was a time of political and police transition in Baltimore. Also, newspapers were barely online and Wikipedia did not yet exist. I did know a new mayor was about to be elected and that Thomas Frazier, the police commissioner who had approved my research, had read the tea leaves and left Baltimore to take a job with the Clinton administration.

I asked to call Colonel Daniels from Major Kojack’s office, which certainly wasn’t respecting the chain of command. But then, best I could tell, I no longer had any place in that chain. Colonel Daniels was reached and sounded surprised to hear my voice. He agreed to meet. I suspect Daniels had no idea that I was even in Baltimore, much less was practicing my about-face in the police academy.

Being naive and not yet indoctrinated into the police world, it never occurred to me how unprecedented it was for a trainee to walk the few downtown blocks from the police academy gym to the office of the police commissioner. I was ushered in. Colonel Daniels now told me to my face that my research was over. All ties with the Baltimore Police Department were severed. My mouth was dry. My heart pounded. I pled for mercy.

I told the acting commissioner that I had come to Baltimore on good faith—my research had

been approved—and to stop me now, to have to return to Harvard, would be an academic and life catastrophe. Colonel Daniels paged another high-ranking officer, Colonel Vrilakis, who called at once. Over the phone, best I could determine, Colonel Vrilakis pled my case. But Colonel Daniels remained unconvinced.

I had heard of Vrilakis, as he was probably my original “in.” A Greek-American, Vrilakis was close to the previous commissioner, Frazier, and was known by a longtime Baltimore political operative, Peter Marudas. Marudas, another Greek-American, was a friend of my father, Charles Moskos. Because of this connection, Baltimore—unlike Boston, New York, and San Francisco—granted me access and permission to conduct my research. The only other city to approve my research, Knoxville, Tennessee, was where my uncle, Harry Moskos, just happened to have been the editor of the *News Sentinel* newspaper. I mention this not because the names are important, but to observe—eloquent as my letter of request may have been—that the only two American police departments that allowed me to do research as a participant observer were those in which I had some family, political, and/or Greek-American connections.

Back in the commissioner’s office, Colonel Daniels explained to me in no uncertain terms that (1) “the people who approved my research had no idea what they were doing,” (2) “the legal expert whose signature was on the letter no longer worked for the department,” and (3) this expert was “incompetent.” Daniels expressed shock that my research project was approved in the first place. All in all, his objections were presented in a mostly legal manner and though I was loath to admit it, they actually seemed like reasonable objections.

Daniels told me that a third colonel had been ordered by former commissioner Frazier to put me through the program (I learned there were nine colonels in total, who, pending Baltimore City Council approval of a new police commissioner, formed a sort of ecumenical council of whom Daniels was the first among equals). I can’t be certain, but I suspect Colonel Daniels vetoed me simply because I had been approved by his much disliked former boss.

Since I couldn’t see any room for negotiation, I just tried to keep the conversation going. At one point, Daniels asked me point blank, “Why don’t you want to become a cop for real?”

“Who would hire me knowing that I only plan to remain a cop for a year, and that I’m doing it for research on my dissertation?”

After a very brief pause he said, “I would.”

This was an opening I hadn’t considered.

Daniels continued, “I would even waive the academy fee [\$13,000 in 1999] we normally charge police officers if they quit the department before working for 2 years.” Daniels also said that he could, without lowering the hiring standards, expedite the hiring process, which was well within his fiefdom as head of the Human Resources Bureau.

The meeting lasted 2 hours. I desperately needed water. I felt like a guillotine was hanging above my head. But in the end, Daniels said I could return to the academy on Monday, in plain clothes, and continue my research but *only if I could be hired as a police officer*. Since Daniels was the cause of my problems, I did not consider him to be an ally. But looking back, Colonel Daniels both showed mercy and remained true to his word.

When I returned home I wrote:

This could be the end. Though if I were an optimist, I would see the silver lining. It’s funny, because I did think that perhaps things were going too smoothly. I figured at some point there would have to be a little story about trouble with access. It seems only poetic. That is, of course, if it works out in the end.

I sent a brief email to my Harvard professors explaining my predicament and this unexpected turn of events. I opened up more to John Van Maanen, who was now also on my dissertation committee:

If things don’t work out, I’m screwed. It would be a catastrophe.... This is one of my nightmares coming true: the commissioner who approved my research is no longer the commissioner.... I don’t know why this was not resolved months ago....

He [Colonel Daniels] did seem to offer me the following: if I went through the normal channels to be hired, he would be willing to hire me as a cop, knowing full well that I would quit after one year. If that were to work, it would be great. I could stay in the same class, would be a full cop, their legal ass would be covered, and I would get paid for my

research. The other possibility, which I think is more likely, is that it all comes crashing down (they sure ain't getting their cuffs back, that's for sure!).

On Monday, after an uneventful weekend exploring Baltimore, my new home, I returned to the academy in jacket and tie (I had but two jackets, one of which came from a previous job waiting tables at Radius, an expensive Boston restaurant). I also began the hiring process by taking the civil service and psychological exams, both of which I apparently passed. Little did I realize that another scaffold was being erected for me on the sixth floor of William James Hall, Harvard University's Sociology Department.

The next day, Tuesday, November 2, I received an email from Harvard (which I did not manage to save) which told me that becoming a cop was not an option. I was to return to Harvard at once. But returning to Cambridge was problematic at many levels.

Police departments stress commitment to the job above all else, including family, friends, holidays, and even self. The police academy, at least from 7:39 a.m. to 4:12 p.m., is a paramilitary and total institution. You can't just take a personal day, no matter your educational pedigree. On weekdays, I couldn't even make a long phone call during the day. Cell phones were not yet common, and I didn't have one. There was a single pay phone in the windowless lunchroom, but the class—particularly the dozen women who were all single mothers—quickly queued up during break. It wasn't possible to hold any conversation that lasted more than a few minutes. My weekends were consumed with hassles and tests related to getting hired. I would later describe the academy as “more like the world's worst all-inclusive vacation than a finely tuned training machine.... The academy environment is less a learning process than a ritualized hazing to be endured.”

From a research perspective, the difference between unpaid participant observer and paid active participant observer seemed relatively minor. And I had also made serious financial, emotional, and academic commitments in moving to Baltimore. I couldn't just split. I had rented and put down a deposit on an apartment. I had

sublet my Cambridge apartment for a year and didn't want to kick out my friend who was living there. I didn't own a car. Also, perhaps stubbornly, I didn't want to quit.

The next day, after work, I emailed a reply:

I was more than a little surprised by your reaction and intense urging to abort and return to Cambridge. In the frustration of the moment, I may have done a very poor job of communicating the goings-on around here. While I never expected my research to be easy, and things have certainly been frustrating beyond my wildest expectations, I do not yet see the situation as doomed. In fact, the potential for excellent research is greater than ever....

Let me now address the issue of me becoming a cop, as this may be the source of any misunderstanding between us....

While it was not my original intention, becoming a full-fledged police officer is an unprecedented opportunity for an academic researcher.... This whole plan may not work. The next few weeks will be difficult.... But I intend to push things to a conclusion in Baltimore before making that decision.

Second, I would like to emphasize that I do not intend to “go native” and forgo my academic career. I am much more committed to earning my Ph.D. than putting in 20 years as a cop. (Though if I did intend to remain a cop—which I don't—I would see nothing wrong with that choice.) I view becoming a police officer as an incredibly rich opportunity to break new ground with sociological research (and an interesting life-experience)....

The main reason why I did not more strongly pursue the option of becoming a cop for research purposes (though I did take the Massachusetts civil service examination) was one of honesty and ethics. It would be unethical for me to deceive a police department, knowing that my true goal is to write a doctoral dissertation, quitting my job after one year....

[I would not] be deceiving the other police academy trainees. They are fully aware of my research goals and my current status in limbo, auditing but out of uniform and no longer participating in the class (I might add that through the past few days they have been incredibly supportive of me and have helped raise my morale from its low point last Friday).

I find it impossible to believe that any effective research I may have conducted as an active participant observer would be tarnished, contaminated, or somehow less valid should I be able to continue as a full-fledged trainee.

Finally, I see no real point giving up and returning to Cambridge in defeat (don't get me wrong: I still may return to Cambridge in defeat yet!). I do not intend to give up the fight until I have no

choice. Also, on a practical level (1) working out the obstacles I face here requires my continuous presence and does not allow me the luxury of even a few days off, and (2) I have made a large commitment to move to Baltimore and moving back is easier said than done....

In the meantime my research is continuing as scheduled despite the distractions....

I hope this clarifies my situation, and I eagerly await your response.

Almost 3 weeks passed. Though I found it odd and disconcerting that I hadn't received a reply, I didn't want to push the issue, so I continued my fieldwork. On November 22, a bit nervous, I wrote an email to my committee in which I updated them on my research and noted, "I have not heard from any of my Harvard advisers since my last letter. I can only hope that no news is good news." Around this time, I received a posted letter from the department chairperson. I found it strange to receive an actual letter, since even in 1999 there was email and telephone. It was as if correspondences from Harvard were being sent on a packet steamer.

The letter from the chairperson, whom I didn't know well, warned that I "will be asked to withdraw from the graduate program" by the end of that academic year for my failure to meet certain academic deadlines. The letter continued ominously:

Faculty members who have been working with you in the program indicated that you are currently away from Cambridge engaged in field research that you regard as preparatory to the development of a dissertation prospectus. They further related that there have been unanticipated changes in the arrangements for access to the prospective field sites, changes that seriously concern these faculty members. They explained that they had advised you to return to Cambridge to consult with them about the directions of the project in light of these changes, and that you have declined to follow their advice.

I replied via email stating that I fully intended to meet the department's deadlines and that my research had not fundamentally changed. I stressed that I was not *unwilling* to meet with my committee but temporarily *unable* to leave Baltimore "without completely abandoning my research." I asked "for the continued support and encouragement from the sociology department."

On November 29 I received a reply from my adviser:

No. It is not the case that "no news is good news." We are all very concerned about you and your work. I do not agree that you should remain in the police academy on the condition that you work as a policeman for a year afterwards. We are not in the business of training policemen here in the sociology department. I am also very concerned about not having received a statement indicating clearly where you are going with this project.... Had things gone smoothly, I would have been willing to continue supporting you, assuming that you sent me a statement of your research objectives. All this, however, has changed. **COULD YOU KINDLY RETURN TO CAMBRIDGE IMMEDIATELY AND RESUME YOUR STUDIES TOWARD YOUR ORAL EXAM AND YOUR THESIS PROSPECTUS. I REGRET TO SAY THAT THIS IS NON-NEGOTIABLE. IF YOU DO NOT RETURN I WILL HAVE TO WITHDRAW FROM YOUR DISSERTATION COMMITTEE.**

Clearly, as Bugs Bunny would say, what we had here was a failure to communicate. I replied the following day:

I am sorry to have alarmed you regarding my commitment to progress in the Sociology Department....

I would very much like to come back to Cambridge to meet with you and my committee. Up until now, however, for me to return to Cambridge would have been tantamount to abandoning my research. I doubt that you wish me to do that, especially after such a difficult effort to gain unprecedented access to a police department....

As for returning to Cambridge while I am at the police academy, my only free days are Saturdays and Sundays. I would, of course, be more than eager to come up on one of those days, if that were convenient for you. If you prefer, I would be able to return to Cambridge on a weekday, once police training is over....

To be sure, I will have a short commitment of approximately 6 months as a police officer after completing the academy. This will allow for far better in-depth observations of police activities and life. In no way does this development alter my academic career plans. Indeed, the potential for path-breaking research is now greater than ever....

It should be noted that I have been in contact with the third member of the committee, Professor John Van Maanen. Having gone through the police academy process himself, he has been an enthusiastic supporter of my research endeavors.

In brief, I plead with you to empathize with my situation. The research methodology remains—despite the trials of the past month—as originally planned and extremely promising....

All in all, the time needed for completion of the projected research should be well within the bounds of doctoral dissertations. I stress this to alleviate any fears that I may have lost my calling as an academic in order to play cops and robbers.

Though the hiring process was proceeding in fits and starts, another deadline was approaching. I had to be hired before the first day of live shooting at the gun range. If not, I would be dropped to the next academy class. This would not have been the end of the world, but it was something I wanted to avoid, especially since any further change to my status in Baltimore would not go over well in Cambridge.

Four days later, another email arrived from my adviser:

I am very relieved that you think it is now possible to come to Cambridge since your refusal or inability to do so would have had serious consequences for you here.... There are many other ethical concerns involved in your decision to do police work after graduating from the academy. I want to make it absolutely clear to you that the [human subjects committee] and the sociology members of your committee, myself included, are opposed to this decision on your part. If you are serious about continuing your studies with us you had better find a way to get out of whatever promises you made about working as a policeman....

I am insisting on the following conditions:

You will have to find some way of getting out of any agreement you made to work as a policeman after graduating. One possible way out for you might be a decision of the Human Subjects committee not to agree to this extension of your research. I do not know how this committee will react to the fact that you have changed your original plans to include police work, but I rather suspect that they will require you to get out of this agreement. In that case you can simply inform the commander down there that you have no choice but to back out of your agreement with him.

If this is not possible, then you are out of luck and will have to change your research plans since **THE DEPARTMENT IS ADAMANT THAT IT WILL NOT AGREE TO AN EXTENSION OF YOUR RESEARCH TO INCLUDE POLICE WORK AFTER GRADUATING FROM THE ACADEMY.** I am writing this in big, bold letters so there can be no misreading of what I am saying. This e-mail will also be placed in your file.

Three days later, on December 6, 1999, I was hired.

There was much paperwork to fill out, retirement benefits explained, uniform measurements to be taken, and a very anticlimactic swearing-in ceremony. In the courthouse, I signed my name in a book and raised my right hand while a bored woman read a 15-second monotone oath. I couldn't follow everything she said, but upholding the Constitutions of Maryland and the United States were part of the bargain. At the end, I simply said, "Yes."

I was a sworn Baltimore City Police Officer in training.

I took a long, late lunch, got my police uniform back from the police officer who had secured it a month prior, and returned to the police academy at 15:30 hours (military time, of course), at the end of a lecture on search and seizure.

My academy class, the fifth class of 1999, or "99-5," was probably not the strongest group of police officers ever (after all, half the classes do have to be below average). But my classmates were very good to me. When I entered the room with my garbage bag of police belongings in hand, it was a clear sign I had been hired. The class broke out in applause. The instructor for that class, Agent Cassidy, beamed as he shook my hand. After class, my squad leader called me to the front of the room, congratulated me, and made me do a push-up for each class member present. Luckily, half the class was at the gun range.

I knew I was on the verge of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but these few months were difficult for me. There was a certain irony to the whole situation. I thought of the cop-movie cliché in which a detective is ordered off the case, but throws his badge down and continues to work as a renegade. Here I was, in real life, working in the police department while being told I would have to give up my Harvard ID. In my notes I joked that I might have to go Times Square to buy an "Official University ID Card" to flash at people (very quickly) when my academic credentials were questioned.

My mother, ever supportive, pointed out that there were plenty of other graduate programs that might appreciate what I was doing. My father, a prominent sociologist himself, was equally

supportive but more quick to point out that no respectable graduate program would accept another school's dropout. Oh well, were I kicked out of school, at least I had a job. I could always hit the streets as a true rogue sociologist.

It often surprises the liberal and well educated, but I received very little resentment about my Ivy League status from the conservative, no-college cops with whom I worked. Most police come from backgrounds without the resources to apply to or be accepted into college, much less an elite graduate school. For a large part of America, there is no "college track." And the Baltimore Police Department, like most police departments, requires no education beyond a high-school diploma or G.E.D. Harvard University is as foreign to most blue-collar workers as white, pickup-truck-driving, God-fearing, gun-loving Republicans were to me. And yet it was through these cops, some of whom are still my friends, that I began to appreciate the advantages I have, earned both through birth and hard work.

As to the Harvard world, there was one line I couldn't get out of my head: "We are not in the business of training policemen here in the sociology department." Well, I should hope not, but I didn't see why academics should look down on those who do. It wasn't as if, through my research, I would befriend criminals or learn how to engage in criminal enterprises, as others—such as Adler, Bourgois, Duck, Goffman, Jacobs, Mohamed and Fritsvold, and Venkatesh—have done with great and deserved acclaim. At some basic level, I was just taking a government job. A few in my academy class even admitted in private that they were becoming police officers not because of a lifelong desire but simply because "the post office wasn't hiring."

Eleven days after being hired, I was able to return to Harvard on a Friday and meet with my advisers. I had no idea what to expect. These meetings turned out to be cordial and blessedly anticlimactic. I was told that Harvard University was a "risk-averse place" and that the sociology department "has had enough." And yet the general tone was very supportive. My adviser implied, with no reference to the substance of the all-caps emails, that he was the last person on my

side, in effect circling the wagons against other enemies in the department.

My other Harvard committee member was also supportive, which I found equally odd. "So just who is the 'they' that we keep referring to?" I asked him. He implied it was the human subjects committee and the department chair. During these meetings, I agreed to be "more sensitive and communicative and proactive about potential potholes." I would write a letter that stated my research goals (which would also help me complete my overdue prospectus), provide a timeline, and address potential legal and ethical issues.

I still don't understand why this needed be discussed in person, and not, say, with a 6 p.m. phone call. But supplication has its place, and ring kissing is certainly better than applying to new graduate school programs. I had another lease on life.

In the following months, to stay in good graces, I looked for any excuse to write my committee. I took extensive daily field notes, but most weeks I had nothing to report. Sometimes a job is just a job. In late March, right before the academy class's graduation, the newly elected mayor, Martin O'Malley, replaced Colonel Daniels (who had since become the commissioner) with Ed Norris (who would later do federal prison time). I wrote my adviser:

Norris is a non-college-educated New York cop. He is known for his foul mouth and blunt talk. O'Malley and Norris are keen on Zero Tolerance and the New York style of policing. Daniels (never accused of being a "softy") was very concerned with Zero Tolerance vis-à-vis minority relations. Evidently, he also had reservations about not being in complete control and becoming a PR man for the Mayor's Police Department.

Given the latest events, I'm wondering if perhaps I should focus specifically on racial perceptions and attitudes among the police going into a high-crime minority area?

I waited a few days, as was custom, and received an unexpectedly positive email from my adviser:

This seems like one of those golden opportunities that sometimes fall in the lap of the lucky or blessed. I personally would not mind if you seized

the opportunity to explore what has become a major national problem re the police and minority communities. At the same time, you should be careful not to become too taken with the obvious topicality of the issue. You have to keep it sociological.

That I could do. The crisis was over. By comparison, my job and fieldwork were easy.

In my academic adviser's defense, he became my adviser at my urging and only shortly before I departed for Baltimore to begin my research. He took me on good faith and at my word as to my Baltimore research agenda. When things changed so quickly—when I was forced to be hired or go home—I knew my intentions were honest, but maybe he felt betrayed, as if I had pulled a quick one and was attempting a bait and switch.

I had switched advisers because I felt my previous adviser's quantitative bent wasn't a good match for my qualitative ambitions (though he graciously agreed to remain on my Ph.D. committee). Also, I wanted a fresh start after failing the sociology department's oral examination. I might be the only student ever to have failed this usually perfunctory departmental exam.

My final adviser also deserves credit for shaping my post-research writing. His hands-off style gave me the freedom to write in my own voice. He encouraged a dissertation that was readable, included no statistical regressions, and could be more easily adapted to book form.

I quit the Baltimore Police Department in 2001, moved to New York City in 2002, and completed my Ph.D. in 2004. Since then I have been teaching in John Jay College of Criminal Justice's Department of Law, Police Science, and Criminal Justice Administration. Based on my dissertation, both the University of Chicago Press and Princeton University Press were interested in publishing my book. I chose the latter and finished a book draft in 2007. It was completed and published the following year to some acclaim and sold surprisingly well.

I still don't entirely know what to make of these events. I never mentioned these research issues in my book, *Cop in the Hood*. They weren't relevant to the greater points about policing in the

ghetto and the war on drugs. Plus I didn't want to sound petty or bitter. Until now I have purposely avoided even reviewing my notes relating to this incident. I saw no point in reliving the experience. I let bygones be bygones (or at least repressed a few emotions). Fifteen years later, I remain on good terms with my former advisers, who have all been very supportive of me and my career.

And yet maybe I was just lucky. Maybe I made bad choices and just happened to get by. Had I abandoned my research and returned to Harvard, I probably could have churned out some quantitative tome on police and crime without ever talking to a police officer or handling a criminal. But that's not what I wanted to do. I didn't want to write a dissertation without heart, one that nobody outside the ivory tower would read, much less understand. Returning to Harvard, as instructed, would have been a personal failure and an academic mistake. Both methodologically and socially, I felt like a black sheep in my graduate program. But then I doubt there is a graduate student anywhere in the world who feels emotionally supported and completely understood.

So after 6 months in the police academy and 14 months policing the streets of East Baltimore—20 months total in the field—I earned civil-service protection (which makes it very hard for police officers to be fired) and quit policing. Technically, I first took a year of unpaid leave, just in case things at Harvard didn't work out. On my way out of Baltimore, a friend and squadmate, one who had been a police officer longer than I had been alive, said in no uncertain terms: "When you leave, you better not come back here. I know that if you come back here, then you're a failure."

Had I been kicked out of Harvard and stayed in policing, I would now have 16 years on the job. I might be burnt out and counting the days till retirement. Or maybe I would have left Baltimore and moved to New York regardless. Perhaps I would have joined the NYPD. Or maybe I would be waiting tables and tending bar for a living. Would that be so bad?

Major Kojack and I talked a few more times after I was called to his office at the police academy. I never knew him well (the new commissioner replaced him before I was even out of the academy), but one thing he said stuck with me. At 7 a.m., he would often smoke a cigarette where I locked up my bike in the parking garage. I would jump to attention and salute, as required by chain of command. He would put me “at ease,” and then we would chat a bit, more informally. Initially, we talked about the benefits and hazards of biking to work. But as a curious person anywhere might inquire about some foreign land, he would turn the conversation to Harvard University. One cold morning, he exhaled a cloud of tobacco smoke and declared: “You should really be proud of yourself that you got into that school.”

These police officers were a lot more accepting of me, a Harvard-educated liberal, than most Ivy League students and faculty are of them. Being a Baltimore City Police Officer helped define me as a person and a scholar. So I needed to make good. Though I don’t train police officers, I am in the business of educating them. Having actually walked the beat, however briefly, gives me a degree of “street cred” in the classroom. But on a more substantive level, I don’t know how I could teach others about policing without the knowledge, understanding, and empathy I gained on the job.

Just a smattering of those I teach in the classroom are active police officers (and they tend to be excellent students). The vast majority of my students, at least at the undergraduate level, are immigrants or upwardly mobile children of immigrants who want to become police officers (New York City, unlike Baltimore, does have a college requirement). Through my research, writing, and teaching—especially at a public university—I actually do help people improve their lives.

When people ask me if I miss policing, I joke that being a professor is a much better job: the pay is about the same, but my hours are better, I get summers off, and nobody shoots at me. And maybe this is important to remember. Only some of us are lucky enough to get advanced degrees and conduct research for a living. Of course, we

should all try to discover new insights, do the right thing, and make the world a better place, but research, even in criminology, is rarely a matter of life or death. Meanwhile, we live the life that many other good and smart and hardworking people—perhaps the same people we study—can only dream of.

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