A Brief History of Law Enforcement

As long as there have been groups of people, there has been a need for law enforcement. The ancient Egyptians utilized watchmen who would attend herds at night to ward off wild animals. Watchmen also provided fire protection to sound the alarm in the event of fire.

The first modern police agency was the Metropolitan Police of London. Sir Robert Peel, known as the father of modern policing, was able to pass the Metropolitan Police Act of London in 1829, which established a police agency. This agency inherited many of the duties of the traditional watchmen such as lighting lamps, calling out the time, and watching for fires. For the first time in history, a full-time force was employed to prevent and detect crime.

The role of the police has almost always been what it is today. The basic mission of the police is to "protect and serve" by safeguarding life and protecting property. Technology over the last 100 years has significantly affected the role of the police. Consider the invention of the automobile. Before the 1900s, police possessed two methods of travel: walking and horses. Cities were relatively small, and the police encountered citizens continuously throughout a shift. The foot patrolman walked into businesses, encountered children, and spoke to many people each day. Citizens in a neighborhood knew the police officer by name. The invention of the automobile changed this paradigm. Now, criminals had a faster way to move and communicate, and the police had to respond. The police were removed from the foot patrol and assigned to patrol vehicles. This largely removed the public interaction of the officers.

This has evolved into the traditional police structure and organization. Over the years, policing has become what is referred to as traditional policing. In the model of traditional policing, the law enforcement agency provides patrol vehicles for officers to move about their assigned areas, or districts. When a call comes to the department, the officers are dispatched by radio, and the unit responds. If a crime has been committed, the scene is turned over to a detective, and the officers resume their isolated patrol from their vehicle, where they ride until the next call for service is assigned. During this time, they look for suspicious activity, but the radio call is the primary method of law enforcement services. Deterring criminal activity is the rule of thumb.

Criminal justice professionals have always sought better practices to accomplish goals. The latest trend, and the one with substantial benefits, is termed Community Oriented Policing Services, or COPS. Using this model, the police mission is to prevent crime, as opposed to merely deterring it. Police officers are tasked with responsibility for the crime rates in their districts and are actively involved in the community. Agencies have rekindled the concept of significant interaction with citizens and are more involved in the quality of life issues within the community instead of simply coming to a scene after a crime is committed. Within this model, the police agencies work with other agencies such as counselors, employment services, community groups, and other
government agencies to find solutions to problems that lead to crime prevention.

The role of the police has always been to serve the public, of which the officer is a member. The only changes in the roles are the methods of accomplishing objectives.