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UNDER THE COVER: How did cops go from big heroes to society's big bad?

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It was one of those grip-and-grin ceremonies us “serious” journalists don’t care about.

Bunched into the far corner of a meeting room paved with deep purple carpet, bureaucrats and business people applied their best rictus grins during a staged photo opp with a cardboard novelty check and two ruby-framed bicycles earlier this month.

The Stockton Boulevard Partnership ponied up \$3,000 to purchase the wheels, which it donated to the Sacramento Police Department in return for two extra bicycle patrols around the six-square-mile corridor, where merchants and property owners regularly gripe about transient panhandlers.

An example of the department's commitment to community policing, Sgt. Doug Morse said during brief remarks, and a sign of why partnerships like these can be mutually beneficial.

"This is where police work is often at its best," Morse told the crowd, munching pizza from paper plates on their laps.

An audience of mostly white, older faces looked on approvingly as a camera crew recorded B-roll for a feel-good segment on the evening news.

This is law enforcement as it wants to be seen—winning hearts and minds. Gracious, professional and not terrifying.

But the reception in this cramped space—wedged into a strip mall where an old man cautiously eyes a bum to see what he's up to—is far from universal.

[Michael Brown](#), Eric Garner and [Tamir Rice](#). It would be easy to sum up the national mood with those three names—unarmed black males, of different ages and states, all killed by police.

But that's also the Crib Notes version of history. Their deaths—and the subsequent decisions of grand juries not to indict those responsible in Brown and Garner's cases—didn't occur in a vacuum, nor are they the only victims of alleged brutality or incompetence.

Antonio Zambrano-Montes, gunned down in Washington this month after throwing rocks at officers who were chasing him.

Gulf War veteran [Parminder Singh Shergill](#). Shot dead in Lodi last year after authorities were alerted to a psychological episode.

Marlene Pinnock, suffering from bipolar disorder. Beaten on the side of a freeway in Los Angeles.

[Kelly Thomas](#), a schizophrenic homeless man. Clubbed to death with flashlights in Fullerton.

[Oscar Grant](#), a young father. Fatally shot in the back while lying down in an Oakland BART station.

Countless others, unknown and uncounted.

Good cops are paying for the sins of the bad, while the bad go mostly unpunished. And any middle ground has been cleared with proverbial tear gas.

Just ask Sacramento police Chief Samuel Somers Jr., who came before [a verbal firing squad last month](#). Less than a year after local residents chided their council members for not using new sales tax revenues to hire more officers, here were 18 different citizens, bashing the department and demanding fewer cops.

So what gives? Why has a profession that was lionized after 9/11 fallen so low in the public opinion realm?

I have some theories I put to the test during a six-hour ride-along in Sacramento and a two-day symposium on crime in America in New York.

Here's **Big Premise #1**: *9/11 changed everything*.

Now, it may be cliché to write that, but that doesn't make it untrue. The deaths of hundreds of police officers in the attacks and its aftermath left the nation awed by the bravery of its first responders and racked with sorrow over the lives lost. But the attacks also cowed the public and its politicians into a sort of inert state when it comes to watchdogging our protectors.

All of a sudden, we didn't care how cops did their jobs, so long as they kept us safe.

I should note that [Joe Domanick](#), assistant director of the Center on Media, Crime and Justice, and author of a book on California's three-strikes law, actually thinks our willful blindness began a decade earlier here in California, with the disappearance and murder of Polly Klaas.

Either way, society's reluctance to get in the way of its civil peacekeeping force helped clear the path for **Big Premise #2**: *War games and toy stories*.

Technological advancements and the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq helped facilitate a domestic arms' race to prepare for an unknowable threat that could drop at any time. There was [virtually nothing that local](#)

agencies couldn't procure under the banner of securing the homeland.

That "militarization" prompted the most visual disconnect for those watching events unfold in Ferguson, Missouri.

But, again, law enforcement is a plow horse that only pulls in one direction. And its masters were too busy covering their eyes to tug the reins.

Onto **Big Premise #3: *Blame the banks.***

Our social safety net wasn't all that intact before multi-billion-dollar financial institutions brought the world to the brink of economic collapse in 2008. But that sure as hell didn't help.

As the recession further dismantled services for the mentally ill and poor, cops became society's duct tape—slapped on over every crack of our social construct.

When you consider the Sacramento Police Department, for instance, it's crazy how many programs they've got going that have almost nothing to do with traditional law enforcement.

Besides juggling several programs for at-risk youth, officers also spent time last year building a home through Habitat for Humanity, assembling bicycles for kids, and donating food, furniture and gifts to a needy family during Christmas.

The department has also begun shifting its strategy to dealing with inebriates and chronically homeless individuals, referring them to local programs rather than citing them. "For the most part, we're trying to work humanely with our homeless and also the mental health population so that we're getting them services that they need and getting them connected," Somers said January 27.

While that all sounds great, a fair question would be to ask whether the work of mentoring at-risk children and assessing the needs of the city's homeless and mentally ill communities is falling *too* heavily on the police.

Crime-stopper, crisis counselor, social worker, quality-of-life upholder—what the hell does it even mean to be a cop anymore?

Even tougher questions lead us to **Big Premise #4: *We know too much and not enough.***

Thanks to the advent of mobile recording devices, anecdotal evidence of police brutality—as well as perceived police brutality—has never been easier to come

by. We watched Pasco, Washington police gun down Antonio Zambrano-Montes and Staten Island cops strangle Eric Garner. We saw Thomas die in real time and that Los Angeles patrolman straddle Marlene Pinnock and pummel her in the face.

Besides shocking and disturbing, these videos sure make it *feel* as if these confrontations are happening more often. But we don't actually know, because the forces that be don't provide this data in any meaningful way.

There's no excuse for that, says Richard Rosenfeld, a criminology professor at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. "Every time an officer shoots at someone, we should want to know about it," he said. "We badly need that evidence. And we don't need it just to count up the dead bodies."

After Brown's death in Ferguson, Rosenfeld and his colleagues studied officer-involved shootings in St. Louis, finding the highest concentration of such encounters happened in areas with a mid-level history of firearm activity, meaning they weren't the most or least violent patrol sectors. Why? It's unclear.

In the absence of such data, all we're left with is horror without context.

As a result, the pendulum has swung. And perhaps, as before, it's swung too far.

Because law enforcement isn't the evil empire. Nor is it the golden child. It's a profession conducted by people, dealing with other people on their worst days. Victims, witnesses, perpetrators—unhappy customers, the lot of them.

Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice are simply the names that caught our attention this time, but they won't be the last. So let's look at what the job is—and needs to be—before this list gets any longer.

As a lieutenant passes with the giant novelty check in hand, Sgt. Morse sizes up the reporter leaning in the doorway. "Ready to roll?"

Now or never.

Read SN&R's cover story, "How to build a perfect cop," out Feb. 19, 2015.

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