



Image courtesy of Richardson Police Department, Texas

Beyond Law Enforcement and Guardians

Restoring Policing's Focus on Protecting People and Pursuing Justice Under the Law

BY
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WORDS MATTER. THE TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE POLICE WORK—LAW ENFORCEMENT, PUBLIC SAFETY, GUARDIAN, PROTECTOR, OR WARRIOR—DO MORE THAN SIGNAL A PHILOSOPHY. THEY DEFINE THE PROFESSION'S PURPOSE, SHAPE PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS, AND INFLUENCE HOW OFFICERS UNDERSTAND THEIR AUTHORITY.

Few professions are as affected by their vocabulary as policing; the language that frames police identity ultimately guides how the work itself is done.

Over the past several decades, *law enforcement* has become the dominant label for policing in the United States. It appears in agency names, policy documents, training academies, and public discourse. The term conveys authority and legitimacy, yet it also narrows perception: If police are primarily “law enforcers,” enforcing the law by issuing citations, making arrests, and securing compliance appears to be the purpose of policing. In reality, enforcement is merely one of its tools.

That misunderstanding has consequences. When enforcement is treated as the mission rather than a means, it distorts how agencies define success and how officers exercise discretion. Arrests and citations become measures of productivity instead of indicators of need or justice. The result is a subtle but pervasive shift from policing in service of people to policing in service of the law as an abstraction. It replaces the constitutional idea of protecting the public's safety and liberty with the administrative goal of compliance.

In response, reformers proposed a new metaphor: the *guardian*. The 2015 President's Task Force

on 21st Century Policing urged officers to replace a “warrior” mentality with a “guardian” one—a mindset emphasizing service, restraint, and partnership with the community.¹ The shift was well-intentioned and overdue. Yet, as the concept evolved, *guardian* also became imprecise; as *law enforcement* overemphasizes control, *guardian* overcorrects by emphasizing compassion without the structure of constitutional purpose. Both risk obscuring policing’s true mission.

This article builds on the foundational principle outlined in the February 2024 Chief’s Counsel column “The Constitutional Purpose of Policing”—the U.S. Constitution defines policing not by its methods but by its mission to protect people and pursue justice under the law.² The discussion that follows applies that framework to the modern debate over police identity and language, explaining how both *law enforcement* and *guardian* can obscure that constitutional purpose.

THE LAW ENFORCEMENT MISCONCEPTION: HOW LANGUAGE DISTORTED PURPOSE

The phrase *law enforcement* sounds self-evident, but it is a relatively recent way of describing the police function. Early U.S. officers, such as constables, sheriffs, and marshals, were charged with keeping the peace in their communities. Their authority derived not from enforcing rules but from preserving public order. As cities professionalized their police forces in the 19th century, the police’s mission remained focused on maintaining order, not enforcing law for its own sake.³

By the middle of the 20th century, U.S. policing shifted from maintaining community order to enforcing the law as its central identity.⁴ Reformers, following leaders such as August Vollmer, sought to depoliticize policing and ground legitimacy in law, procedure, and technical competence.⁵ The result was an emphasis on neutrality and standardized enforcement as markers of professionalism, displacing the service and relationship traditions of earlier “peace officer” work.⁶ Yet reforms intended to bolster accountability under law gradually redefined police identity around enforcement itself, narrowing the mission from preserving peace to compelling compliance.⁷

CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS

Although enforcement is an essential governmental function, the Constitution treats it as an instrument to advance public welfare and not as an end in itself. Under the 10th Amendment, the general police power reserved to the states exists to protect public health, safety, and welfare.⁸ The Constitution grants limited powers and treats enforcement authority as derivative, not primary. It exists only to advance those constitutional ends. Officers act within a system designed to safeguard both safety and liberty, and the 4th, 5th, and 14th Amendments set the limits on that authority. The government may intrude on liberty only when its actions are justified, proportionate, and lawful.

Enforcement, therefore, is never an end in itself. The measure of police success is not how effectively officers

compel compliance, but how faithfully they uphold safety, fairness, and justice without violating constitutional rights. When enforcement becomes the mission, it inverts that order by treating the law as a weapon to be wielded rather than a boundary to be respected.

FROM PROTECTION TO COMPLIANCE

The law enforcement identity subtly redefines what success looks like. Agencies track arrests, stops, and citations as indicators of productivity, and officers are often praised for being “proactive” when they initiate enforcement activity and not when they prevent harm or resolve conflict without legal action. Policies and performance systems reinforce this bias, rewarding outputs that are easy to count rather than outcomes that are difficult to measure, such as reduced harm, increased trust, or enhanced legitimacy.

The result is confusion between activity and accomplishment. When “enforcing the law” becomes the mission, every infraction can seem to demand a response even when discretion, mediation, or compassion would better serve the community. Officers trained and evaluated under that paradigm may internalize the message that restraint is failure. This inversion of purpose creates real-world risk—to public trust and to officers themselves—when encounters escalate unnecessarily because compliance becomes the goal.

THE HUMAN CONSEQUENCES

Equating enforcement with purpose also shapes how officers perceive the public. The community can come to be viewed less as a collective of people to protect and more as a population to regulate. The relationship becomes transactional: citizens comply and officers enforce. This orientation undermines the principle, articulated by Sir Robert Peel nearly two centuries ago, that “the police are the public and the public are the police.”⁹ When officers internalize the idea that their job is to *enforce* rather than *protect*, they risk losing sight of the deeper constitutional relationship that grants them authority—the consent of the governed.

In practice, this distortion manifests across many policing functions. Consider an officer dispatched to a neighborhood dispute or a mental health call. A law enforcement orientation invites a legalistic approach to identify the violation, determine probable cause, and make an arrest. A public safety orientation seeks to determine whether any danger exists, identify who needs help, and prevent harm. Both approaches operate within the law, but only one aligns with policing’s constitutional purpose of protecting people and pursuing justice.

While reform and rhetoric often narrow policing to enforcement, the reality of officers’ daily work tells a broader story. Crucially, much of policing already reflects this broader constitutional purpose. Officers regularly respond to traffic collisions, search for missing persons, assist during disasters, and render medical aid. These duties are central to public safety and illustrate that policing’s foundation is service and

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protection, not compulsion. The Constitution provides the unifying purpose that these frameworks lack. It defines policing not by metaphor but by mission: to protect people and pursue justice under law.

REFRAMING ENFORCEMENT AS A TOOL, NOT A MISSION

The solution is not to abandon enforcement—it remains indispensable to public safety—but to restore it to its proper place. Enforcement is a means by which police advance their constitutional duty to protect people, not a definition of that duty. Laws exist to safeguard the public good; enforcing them should serve that same end. Officers uphold the law not for its own sake but to ensure justice and safety under it.

When understood this way, policing becomes more coherent. Enforcing the law, maintaining order, preventing crime, and serving the community are not competing missions but integrated responsibilities under a single constitutional purpose. The officer's role is to discern which tool—enforcement, persuasion, assistance, or presence—best fulfills that purpose in a given moment.

THE GUARDIAN IDEAL—A WELL-MEANING BUT IMPRECISE RESPONSE

When *law enforcement* became synonymous with policing, reformers sought a counterbalance to emphasize service over control, legitimacy over coercion, and partnership over authority. The term *guardian* emerged as that alternative. It gained prominence in 2015 when the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing urged agencies to “embrace a guardian—rather than a warrior—mindset.”¹⁰

The roots of the *guardian* framing trace to two influential sources. First, Sue Rahr and Dr. Stephen K. Rice's 2015 paper for the Executive Session on Policing and Public Safety, *From Warriors to Guardians: Recommitting American Police Culture to Democratic Ideals*, argued that U.S. policing needed to re-anchor itself in constitutional legitimacy rather than crime statistics or tactical dominance.¹¹ They contrasted the “warrior cop,” focused on control and survival, with the “guardian officer,” focused on service, restraint, and empathy.

Second, legal scholar Seth Stoughton refined the distinction in two widely cited law review articles.¹² He described the *warrior* as an officer who views policing as a battle between order and chaos, and the *guardian* as one who “prioritizes service over crimefighting” and seeks to “protect civilians from unnecessary indignity and harm.”¹³ Together, these analyses shaped how reformers and police leaders began to describe a more service-oriented model of policing.

At its core, the guardian model sought to humanize the profession. It called for officers to see themselves not as combatants against crime but as protectors of people, partners with the community in the shared work of safety. Guardianship captured the democratic essence of U.S. policing: authority derived from the consent of the governed and exercised through fairness, dignity, and respect.

This was a healthy and overdue correction. For too long, parts of the police ethos had emphasized toughness and control while undervaluing empathy, listening, and legitimacy. The guardian concept reminded officers that procedural fairness and communication are not signs of weakness but expressions of strength. Yet as those virtues were bundled under a single metaphor, important distinctions were lost.

As the metaphor spread, its meaning blurred. *Guardian* began to serve less as a professional framework for decision-making and more as a personal identity. Officers were encouraged to “be” guardians rather than to act within clear professional standards. The focus shifted from how decisions are made to what kind of person one is presumed to be.

That distinction matters. Professionalism is defined by discipline, reflected in competence, character, and commitment expressed through consistent lawful conduct. Personal identity, by contrast, depends on self-perception and intention. When policing is defined by identity rather than professional standards, legitimacy becomes a matter of sincerity instead of accountability. Officers may feel morally justified in their actions even when those actions fail to meet constitutional or organizational expectations. What began as a corrective mindset evolved into a label that, like *law enforcement*, risks narrowing rather than clarifying the purpose of policing.

This critique does not reject the compassion or restraint that the guardian ideal encourages. The constitutional framework fully encompasses those virtues—it translates empathy into duty and restraint into discipline, grounding them in the professional obligation to protect people and pursue justice within the law.

EMPIRICAL REALITY: OVERLAP, NOT OPPOSITION

Empirical research underscores that the guardian-versus-warrior framing oversimplifies the reality of police work. In *Police Officers as Warriors or Guardians: Empirical Reality or Intriguing Rhetoric?*, criminal justice professor Kyle McLean and his colleagues surveyed nearly 400 officers to test whether the two mindsets exist as distinct orientations.¹⁴ The results showed that warrior and guardian mindsets are distinct but related, and most officers hold elements of both. Those with stronger guardian orientations emphasized communication, empathy, and procedural fairness. Those with stronger warrior orientations emphasized officer safety and control. These findings confirm that neither label captures the full professional reality and support the need for a constitutional rather than metaphorical frame. In short, policing requires both courage and compassion, vigilance and restraint—the dichotomy between warrior and guardian is rhetorical shorthand, not descriptive reality.

McLean and his colleagues concluded that defining officers solely through one lens or the other “calls into question the utility of this debate.” Their conclusion mirrors the constitutional logic discussed earlier: when purpose is reduced to identity, the profession loses clarity.

Both the *law enforcement* and *guardian* frameworks reflect elements of policing that are true, yet neither defines the whole. *Law enforcement* emphasizes authority and control; *guardian* emphasizes empathy and restraint. What both omit is the constitutional through line that gives those qualities meaning.

RECLAIMING THE CONSTITUTIONAL PURPOSE—PROTECTING PEOPLE AND PURSUING JUSTICE

If *law enforcement* narrowed policing to compulsion and *guardian* idealized it without precision, the Constitution offers a clearer and more enduring foundation. The police exist to protect people and pursue justice, not as metaphors but as functions of a democratic government bound by the rule of law.

PURPOSE BEFORE IDENTITY

The Constitution charges the government with establishing justice and securing liberty. The police power reserved to the states exists to carry out that duty by protecting the public's safety and welfare. Within this framework, the 4th, 5th, and 14th Amendments both

authorize and limit the use of governmental power, ensuring that safety is pursued within the boundaries of the law.

This constitutional lens reframes the central question from “What kind of officer am I?” to “What am I authorized and obligated to accomplish for the public?” It recognizes that an officer's role is not defined by labels of guardian or enforcer but by the constitutional duty to serve the public, uphold justice, and protect the rights the Constitution secures. Professional identity follows from purpose, not the other way around. When that purpose is clear, discretion becomes disciplined and legitimacy grows from performance, not from labels.

ENFORCEMENT AS ONE TOOL OF JUSTICE

Under this framework, enforcement retains importance but loses dominance. Arrests, citations, and searches are legitimate only when they further public safety and the equitable administration of justice. They are instruments of constitutional purpose, not the purpose itself.

An officer who resolves a tense neighborhood dispute or issues a warning instead of a citation when safety allows is not failing to enforce the law but fulfilling its intent to promote safety and fairness. Likewise, an officer who courageously confronts an armed suspect acts not as a warrior defending territory but as a public protector confronting danger on behalf of others.

INTEGRATING COURAGE AND RESTRAINT

The same constitutional principles that authorize the use of power also impose limits on it. Effective policing, therefore, depends on a balance between the courage to confront danger and the restraint to exercise power with judgment. The law demands that officers demonstrate both.

The officer who acts decisively to stop violence and the officer who stays calm to comfort a grieving parent are guided by the same constitutional purpose to protect people and preserve justice. Each demonstrates that strength and compassion are not opposing traits but complementary virtues that define professional character. When courage and restraint operate together, they transform authority into legitimacy and ensure that the use of power remains faithful to its purpose.

OPERATIONAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These principles require institutional follow through. Reclaiming constitutional purpose is not merely a matter of language; it has tangible implications for how agencies define success, train personnel, and communicate with the public. To align daily practice with its constitutional mission, policing

must reinforce that purpose through its systems and leadership priorities.

▪ **Mission Statements and Training**

Agency mission statements should define policing around protection and justice, not enforcement alone. From the academy to the command staff, training should connect every tactical, legal, and interpersonal skill to that overarching purpose. Officers must understand not only what they are authorized to do but why they do it.

▪ **Performance Metrics**

What agencies measure signals what they value. Success should be assessed through outcomes that reflect constitutional goals, such as reducing harm and pursuing justice for the community, rather than through counts of arrests, citations, or stops. Metrics should capture the quality, proportionality, and legitimacy of police work, not merely its volume.

▪ **Leadership and Organizational Character**

Leadership defines an agency's character and the collective reflection of its values, priorities, and integrity in action. Organizational character develops through what leaders model, reward, and tolerate. When executives demonstrate both courage and restraint, they show that strength and empathy are complementary virtues. By grounding leadership decisions in constitutional purpose, chiefs can unify those traits into a single professional identity that advances justice, protects people, and sustains public trust.

▪ **Public Communication**

How agencies explain their work matters. Describing police actions in the language of safety and justice, rather than enforcement or identity, reinforces legitimacy and understanding. When the public hears how an action protects them and why it advances justice, they see the Constitution at work.

FROM LABELS TO LEGITIMACY

Policing's identity crisis is, at its core, a language problem. Over time, terms like *law enforcement* and *guardian* have come to stand in for purpose, shaping how officers see themselves and how communities see them. Each captures an aspect of the profession's reality, but neither defines its essence. Enforcement is necessary but not sufficient; guardianship is noble but not precise. Both miss the constitutional point.

This confusion of language leads to a confusion of purpose which, in turn, erodes legitimacy. When officers act with a clear understanding of why they hold authority, discretion becomes disciplined and restraint becomes strength. When leaders define success by how well their agencies advance safety and justice, rather

than compliance or image, the profession grows more confident and the public more trusting. When clarity of purpose and disciplined leadership converge, policing realizes its highest calling—the constitutional duty to protect the public and uphold justice with restraint and courage. ▽

NOTES:

¹President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015).

²Arif Alikhan, "The Constitutional Purpose of Policing," Chief's Counsel, *Police Chief* 91, no. 2 (February 2024): 16–18.

³Samuel Walker and Charles Katz, *The Police in America: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2017), 30–33; Egon Bittner, *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Mental Health, 1970).

⁴Christopher Stone and Jeremy Travis, *Toward a New Professionalism in Policing* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2011), pp. 4–7, 14–15.

⁵Stone and Travis, *Toward a New Professionalism in Policing*.

⁶Stone and Travis, *Toward a New Professionalism in Policing*.

⁷Michale D. Bush and Kimberly D. Dodson, "Police Officers as Peace Officers: A Philosophical and Theoretical Examination of Policing from a Peacemaking Approach," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology* 6, no. 3 (2014): 194–205 (discussion of professionalization shifting policing's mission toward enforcement and the fading of the peace-officer ideal); Kyle McLean et al., "Police Officers as Warriors or Guardians: Empirical Reality or Intriguing Rhetoric?" *Justice Quarterly* 36, no. 7 (2019): 1100–1124 (showing the persistence of enforcement- and compliance-oriented professional identity).

⁸*United States v. Lopez*, 514 U.S. 549, 567 (1995) ("Under our federal system, the 'States possess primary authority for defining and enforcing the criminal law.'"), quoting *Engle v. Isaac*, 456 U.S. 107, 128 (1982); *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, 197 U.S. 11, 24–25 (1905) ("The authority of the State to enact this statute ... is commonly called the police power... to protect the public health and the public safety.");

⁹Sir Robert Peel, "The Principles of Law Enforcement," Home Office (1829), Principle 7.

¹⁰President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*.

¹¹Sue Rahr and Stephen K. Rice, "From Warriors to Guardians: Recommitting American Police Culture to Democratic Ideals," *New Perspectives in Policing Bulletin* (U.S. Department of Justice, April 2015).

¹²Seth Stoughton, "Law Enforcement's 'Warrior' Problem," *Harvard Law Review* 128, no. 6 (2015): 225–234; Seth Stoughton, "Principled Policing: Warrior Cops and Guardian Officers," *Wake Forest Law Review* 51 (2016): 611–676.

¹³Stoughton, "Principled Policing," 614.

¹⁴McLean et al., "Police Officers as Warriors or Guardians," 1096–1118.