This Week's Citation Classic®

CC/NUMBER 13
MARCH 30, 1987

Bittner E. The police on skid-row: a study of peace keeping. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 32:699-715, 1967.
[Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute, San Francisco, CA]

Police work on skid row is not controlled by either explicit legal mandates or agency regulation but involves, instead, the exercise of expert craftsmanship developed in response to a variety of demand conditions. The possession and use of the knowledge and skill accounting for effectiveness are neither cultivated nor rewarded in the police establishment. [The *SSCI*® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 175 publications.]

Egon Bittner
Department of Sociology
Brandeis University
Waltham, MA 02254-9110

February 3, 1987

Soon after taking the position of research social scientist at the Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute in San Francisco, I engaged in a study of the paths by which mentally ill persons reach psychiatric hospitals. One of my earliest observations was that many moved through police custody. This led to an effort to determine how police officers became involved in the process. From then on, the inquiry about the movement of patients was borne mainly by a sense of duty, while interest led me to more and more extensive observations of police work. For approximately eight months, I spent five evenings a week accompanying police officers on every duty assigned to them. All this started in a quite unplanned way and remained throughout its duration an entirely open-ended ethnographic adventure.

Initially, my interest was stimulated by the sight of the immense richness and scope of police work, leading to the realization that the range of police responsibility was virtually unlimited. But I was soon even more fascinated by the unanticipated high level of competence of some police officers in the handling of problems of obviously high complexity, seriousness, and importance. This was the more remarkable for the fact that the officers who did what seemed to be complicated and demanding work with impressive skill received no special recognition from their superiors and peers. In fact, the officers themselves did not seem to be cognizant of their remarkable capabilities. This attitude puzzled me, and I guessed that it might be related to the fact that the majority of people with whom the police deal are people on the bottom of the social heap. The work, so to speak, was perceived as not being entitled to higher regard than the people who were its targets.

While in San Francisco, I accompanied police officers on their varied errands in all parts of the community and did not disentangle the work seen in the blighted areas from the rest. Thus I welcomed the opportunity offered by Edward Rose, then of the Sociology Department of the University of Colorado, to spend a couple of weeks studying police work on Denver's skid row that was slated for demolition in connection with an urban renewal project. Here it became clear that while officers accepted the prevalent social evaluation of the people on skid row, and of the related popular assessment of police work as a low-grade occupation, their intervention in problems presented to them was permeated by a sense of craftsmanship that was as unformulated as it was unacknowledged.

Though I had not been quite fully conscious of it at the outset of this project, it became quite clear even before I went to Denver that I was interested in determining what police work could be at its very best. The theoretical justification for my search for the ideal was formulated only in later work; at the time I worked in Denver, I did not feel obliged to justify it to anyone. Indeed, I had no publication plans for my observations. Thus, I gave my permission to Rose to have my field notes published without analysis, as a report issued by the Bureau of Social Research, which he directed. Only later, and only as a part of discharging my responsibilities to the agency that funded the "paths to the hospital" project did I write and submit for publication my observations of the police on skid row.

Naturally, I am flattered by the attention the article received. But I am keenly aware of the fact that the interest a publication attracts tends to snowball in ways that have little to do with merit. Moreover, publications benefit from dealing with topics that happen to be in the focus of widespread interest. The matter is quite simple, of course: in order to be frequently cited there must be many occasions for citations. A paper I wrote some years later, and which I regard as containing a far stronger and clearer account of the significance and importance of police work, has not received nearly as much attention.[1] [Maurice Punch's 1983 book, for which I wrote a rather lengthy introduction, is a good source for readers interested in more recent work in the field.[2]]

1. Bittner E. Florence Nightingale in pursuit of Willie Sutton: a theory of the police. (Jacob H, ed.) *The potential for reform of criminal justice*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1974. p. 17-44. (Cited 15 times.)
2. Punch M, ed. *Control in the police organization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983. 346 p.