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.]

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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 them-