

# Why would you want to be a cop?

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By Peter Moskos

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Most of my students at John Jay College of Criminal Justice want to become police officers. I try to appeal to their better natures and encourage them to maintain their idealism. But sometimes when I ask, "Why do you want to be a cop?" it can seem like a warning.

Since December, two police officers have been shot in Ferguson, Mo., and two fatally in New York City. Thankfully, such ambushes and executions of police officers are rare, but danger is part of the job. Statistically, other occupations may be more lethal, but policing is unique in that danger is part of the job. A police officer can do everything right and still be killed.

Over the past year, protesters around the country — the vast majority peaceful — have been vocally anti-police.

And yet despite the anti-police attitude, my students still dream of wearing blue to serve and protect. Sometimes visitors come to my class and they often comment that my students don't look like "typical" police officers. Every year I take an informal survey of the undergraduate students I teach, and roughly 90% are foreign-born or have at least one immigrant parent. Typical would be a young man born in the Dominican Republic living in Queens or a Caribbean woman living in Brooklyn.

My striving students mostly dream of rising up to the working/middle class. They dream of a civil-service job because it means security, and that means a lot to those whose families have never experienced it. But my students don't dream of any government job; they want to be police officers because they believe policing is a noble profession.

I speak to a lot of police officers, retired, on the job, and soon-to-be. Anybody who knows cops knows it's in their nature to complain (there's an old barb about there being just two things cops don't like: change and the status quo). But the idealism of my students can be lost with on-the-job realities: incompetent bosses, nasty working conditions, and any quota system (be it for revenue or arrests) that demeans their professionalism.

Police officers try to maintain their pride and idealism on the job, but it can be a tough battle when faced with a hostile political structure and a misunderstanding public too quick to blame police for society's ills. Blaming one officer for the misdeed of another is neither fair nor productive. To have the hashtag #blacklivesmatter held against you is both frustrating and absurd. The general public doesn't seem to care about black lives unless a cop is involved. Police see and help victims every day while most murders don't even make the evening news.

Police do become thin-skinned to criticism — too quick to take offense to even well intentioned criticism — because the job isn't just what you do for a living, it ends up defining who you are. The job damages you physically and, more worrisome, drains you emotionally.

Policing demands a level of hyper-alertness synonymous with post-traumatic stress disorder.

I know what this entails because I was a cop. I dealt with society's least wanted and most violent. I was on the front lines of the futile and damaging war on drugs. I watched young black men bleed out on the street, their lives snuffed for some seemingly petty beef.

I was able to quit policing, finish my PhD and become a professor. I am still proud of my uniform and the job my squad mates and I did every night in Baltimore's Eastern District from midnight to 8AM, but teaching is a better job. I like to joke that the pay is about the same, but the hours are better, I get holidays off, and nobody shoots at me.

Still, it took me years after I quit policing before I could close my eyes on the subway or sit in a restaurant without keeping an eye on the entrance. I'm no longer society's guardian; I still respect those who are.

Of course some cops love their jobs till the day they retire (a few never want to quit). But most police have good days and bad days (that's why they call it "work"). And police often end up seeing themselves as victims because the same job stability, benefits, and pension that once seemed so appealed become a trap. The job becomes little more than that of a uniformed, armed, and unwanted babysitter free to anyone who can pick up a phone and dial three digits.

When told of my plans to return to school and get my Ph.D., a friend told me, "It's different for you, because you don't have to deal with this sh\*t for the next twenty years! ... This is where I'm going to be." He had a point. What do you do when you're burnt out, hate your job, and wake up every day dreading another shift policing the same fools who never have work to go to?

Most people change jobs if they're miserable. But policing is strangely inhospitable to job transfers. After even a few years on the job, with little or no college education and few marketable job skills, it becomes practically impossible for most cops to quit or even transfer to another department.

Now pay for police isn't as bad as some cops would have you believe. The median income is about \$54,000. Students who are active police officers often make more than their professor. And for those who want to be police, many come from retail jobs paying \$9 an hour, or less than \$20,000 a year.

So as best they can, police officers make do with the job they have. Certainly police can and should play a role in rebuilding the public's trust. But the public should have more empathy for those who have no choice but to deal with society's problems — poverty, massive incarceration, racism, crime — that we, collectively and to our shame, cannot or will not fix.