

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Adopting an organizational accident framework offers a measure of coherence, even if to a modest degree, to the fragmented, decentralized and disparate world that is American law enforcement. American law enforcement is unique among the Western world's policing practices, insofar as there is no centralized government authority regulating the police, law enforcement services are not integrated, and training, recruiting and lateral transfer are not uniform across the country. The organizational accident model presents a standard method to examine and learn from mistakes, so repeating the same mistake is lessened; said differently, it presents a unified structure for routinely learning from error. When systematic information about an accident is not collected and compared against a given standard (i.e., measured), it is not possible to state with any certainty how the agency plans to improve operations, or reduce risk. Blaming individual police officers for errors is not the answer for a sustained solution, inasmuch as individual officers are not the only stakeholders in the criminal justice system; police managers, prosecutors, public defenders, defense attorneys and judges all have an interest at stake and to ignore their contribution to the error is to remain in precarious territory.

The police are the largest, most visible segment of the criminal justice system. They will likely continue to bear the brunt of social criticism for errors that lead to grave consequences, particularly if it is later discovered that it was their initial conduct that facilitated the adverse outcome (i.e., wrongful arrest, wrongful conviction, homicide by misadventure). Therefore, it is they who have the most to gain by leading the charge to adopt a preventative system like the one discussed here. The implications are many, from the practical to the abstract (e.g., legitimacy), but one point is certain: unless and until the police embrace a systems approach to addressing errors, complex police organizations and the officers that reify them are destined to repeat them.