

# The High Cost of the Thin Blue Line

## When protecting misconduct endangers officers, communities, and public institutions

The greatest long-term threat to the safety and legitimacy of a nation's police force may not come solely from the citizens who break its laws. It can also come from within—from a culture that fails to identify, intervene with, discipline, or remove officers whose conduct presents a foreseeable danger to the public and to their fellow officers.

This is the high cost of the "thin blue line."

The overwhelming majority of police officers will never become Derek Chauvin. That is precisely why effective accountability should be understood as **pro-police as well as pro-community**. An officer who repeatedly abuses authority does not merely endanger the people encountered on the street. That officer potentially transfers enormous risks to every ethical officer who wears the same uniform.

George Floyd's murder demonstrates how catastrophic that transferred risk can become.

Derek Chauvin did not enter policing on May 25, 2020. His personnel history subsequently became an important part of the public examination of what happened. The appropriate institutional question is therefore larger than the guilt of one officer: **What opportunities existed to recognize dangerous conduct before it culminated in a man's death?**

That question matters because the consequences did not end at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue.

George Floyd lost his life. His family suffered an irreversible loss. Minneapolis experienced protests, riots, fires, looting, violence and enormous property destruction. Communities across the United States experienced unrest. Police officers who had never met Chauvin suddenly found themselves confronting anger generated partly by another officer's conduct. Departments faced extraordinary operational pressure. Public confidence in policing deteriorated.

And police officers themselves paid an extraordinary price.

After 2020, American law enforcement experienced dramatically elevated resignations and retirements. Minneapolis suffered an especially severe staffing contraction. Minnesota experienced an extraordinary increase in police duty-disability claims, rising from 97 claims in 2019 to 171 in 2020 and 299 in 2021. Minneapolis recorded 148 PTSD workers' compensation claims in 2020 alone. Nationally, assaults against police increased, while departments struggled to recruit and retain personnel.

These statistics reveal an uncomfortable truth: **police misconduct can victimize police.**

When an institution protects a dangerous officer—or simply fails to identify and correct dangerous behavior—the eventual consequences can be borne by thousands of innocent officers. They inherit the public anger. They work the demonstrations. They stand between opposing groups. They absorb insults and threats. They

work mandatory overtime. Their families experience the stress. Some develop PTSD. Some leave careers they once loved.

Accountability therefore cannot be characterized simply as being "against police."

Accountability protects police.

I approach this question with a personal experience that also requires careful investigation rather than assumption. In 2013, I experienced what I believe was a profoundly disturbing encounter with law enforcement, including conduct and a whispered statement that remained with me afterward. Years later, aspects of Chauvin's conduct caused me to wonder whether there could have been some connection—whether the officer might even have been Chauvin, or whether similar training or departmental culture might explain similarities I perceived.

**I cannot presently establish either proposition as fact.**

That distinction is essential.

The responsible response is not to turn a traumatic recollection into an accusation against a particular person. It is to preserve records, identify the officer through contemporaneous documentation if possible, examine training histories and complaint records, and determine what the evidence actually establishes.

But the counterfactual raised by the experience remains important regardless of the officer's identity:

**What if dangerous police behavior is identified and stopped early?**

Suppose an officer demonstrates unjustified violence, intimidation, dishonesty or a pattern of escalating misconduct. Suppose another officer witnesses it. A supervisor receives a complaint. A medical record documents an injury. A body camera captures something troubling. Someone recognizes that this officer should not continue exercising coercive authority without investigation.

What happens next can affect far more than the person filing the complaint.

Removing one genuinely dangerous officer may protect dozens of future citizens.

It may also protect hundreds of police officers from eventually being placed in harm's way because of that officer's actions.

This changes the meaning of police solidarity.

The highest form of loyalty to fellow officers is not concealing misconduct. It is preventing a colleague's misconduct from destroying another officer's career, traumatizing another family, damaging a department's legitimacy or setting a city on fire.

A firefighter does not demonstrate loyalty by ignoring another firefighter who deliberately creates fires.

A surgeon does not protect medicine by concealing a colleague who repeatedly endangers patients.

Police should not be asked to demonstrate brotherhood by protecting conduct that threatens the institution they have sworn to serve.

There is also an important distinction between **mistakes and dangerous misconduct**. Police officers make extraordinarily difficult decisions under pressure, frequently with incomplete information. An accountability system that treats every imperfect judgment as corruption will produce defensive policing and destroy morale. A credible system must therefore protect due process for officers while becoming exceptionally good at recognizing the smaller subset of behaviors that indicate dishonesty, unnecessary violence, retaliation, abuse of authority or escalating instability.

That is not anti-police reform. It is occupational risk management.

The lesson of Minneapolis should therefore extend beyond the prosecution of Derek Chauvin.

We should calculate the full cost of institutional failure: death and injury to civilians; trauma to families; PTSD and disability among officers; resignations and retirements; recruitment and training costs; overtime; workers' compensation; litigation and settlements; damaged businesses; destroyed property; National Guard and emergency deployments; lost economic activity; and the far harder-to-measure destruction of trust between police and the communities they serve.

Once those costs are counted together, the economics of early intervention become overwhelming.

A complaint system is inexpensive compared with a riot.

A competent internal investigation is inexpensive compared with a wrongful-death settlement.

Psychological intervention is inexpensive compared with permanent disability.

Removing one demonstrably dangerous officer is inexpensive compared with losing hundreds of good ones.

And an officer willing to stop another officer from crossing the line should be regarded not as betraying the brotherhood, but as protecting it.

That may ultimately be the lesson hidden inside the phrase "**thin blue line**."

A line is strongest when its damaged sections are repaired—not when everyone agrees to pretend the damage isn't there.

The objective should therefore never be police versus community. It should be **ethical police and communities together against misconduct, violence and institutional failure**.

George Floyd should have gone home.

The officers subsequently traumatized by riots and unrest should have gone home healthy.

Businesses should not have burned.

Families should not have lost livelihoods.

Citizens should not have been terrorized.

Good officers should not have abandoned their careers because another officer destroyed the public's trust in their badge.

We cannot know every event that would have been prevented had earlier interventions occurred. Counterfactual history cannot establish that.

But we can learn from the cost.

The thin blue line becomes dangerously expensive when solidarity means silence.

It becomes extraordinarily valuable when solidarity means that every officer is willing to protect the public—and one another—from the rare colleague who should no longer carry the authority of the badge.