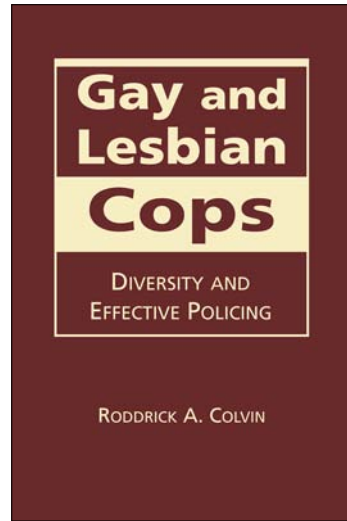


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**Gay and Lesbian Cops:  
Diversity and  
Effective Policing**

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# 1

## Lesbian and Gay Police Officers

**On September 28, 2000, nineteen-year-old freshman Eric Franklin Plunkett** was found dead in his dorm room at Gallaudet University, the world-renowned school for the deaf and hard-of-hearing in Washington, D.C. Plunkett had been beaten to death in an environment that considered itself as much a family as a university. With just over 2,000 students, Gallaudet is a close-knit community, with strong ties to the deaf and hard-of-hearing around the world. The university has many safety protocols in place specifically designed with its community in mind, including a security force trained in sign language, a strict visitation policy, and restricted barcode access to residents' dormitories. In such a community, crime is low and death—not to mention murder—is rare. Plunkett's murder represented only the third violent death in the university's history.<sup>1</sup>

On Friday, September 29, Washington's Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) dispatched fifteen detectives to the university to investigate Plunkett's murder. The detectives, with the assistance of interpreters, interviewed students and other campus community members. The initial investigation yielded little information and incomplete data. The MPD detectives were able to surmise that Plunkett was gay, and that he had had an altercation with a friend prior to his death. This information led officers to focus their investigation on a fellow student, Thomas Minch. On October 3, under internal pressure as well as pressure from the university community, the MPD accused Minch of Plunkett's murder. Minch was questioned for six hours, and charged with second-degree murder based on his violent behavior and inconsistent responses during the interrogation: Minch repeatedly slammed his

fists on the table during questioning, and lied about having had a sexual encounter with Plunkett. However, due to lack of evidence, within twenty-four hours charges against Minch were dropped and he was released from custody. In a public statement, the MPD noted that Minch was being released without prejudice, but was still considered a suspect. Based on that information, the university barred Minch from the campus pending the resolution of the Plunkett murder investigation. Although Minch had a confirmed alibi (witnesses had seen him at a theater on the night of the murder), the detectives focused their efforts on gathering additional evidence against him.

Despite interviews with the campus community and pursuit of anonymous tips, the investigation stalled after Minch was released. As the months dragged on, the campus community, the larger deaf and hard-of-hearing community, and the lesbian and gay community began to express concerns about their safety, accusing the MPD of ignoring them and not taking the murder investigation seriously. In particular, lesbian and gay students expressed concerns about antigay incidents that were reported to police but not investigated. Additionally, many in the campus community were offended that the police chief cited “communications problems” as the main reason that the murder investigation was progressing so slowly. Many students, faculty, and other community members highlighted the fact that the campus community was filled with people who interacted with the hearing community on a daily basis. These community members use spoken language, read lips, or use interpreters to communicate. The president of Gallaudet’s student council noted that such an excuse would not be tolerated in non-English-speaking communities in D.C., and thus was not acceptable for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

Given the lack of progress by the MPD and the investigating officers, it is easy to imagine that Plunkett’s murder might have gone unsolved. Because Plunkett was gay, some people thought that his murder might have been hate-motivated. It was this suspicion that led two lesbian police officers to return to Gallaudet to interview members of the gay community, specifically members of the university’s lesbian, gay, and straight student group, the Lambda Society, of which Plunkett was the secretary. Based on their in-depth interviews, the officers were convinced that the focus of the investigation should be shifted to obtaining forensics data from Plunkett’s dorm room and personal computer, which might yield better information about the murder and which the MPD detectives had failed to do as part of their initial investigation. The efforts of these officers eventually proved

fruitful, but not for this case and not before another student was also murdered on campus.

On February 3, over four months after Plunkett had been beaten to death, Benjamin Scott Varner was stabbed to death in the same dorm building. Like Plunkett, Varner was also nineteen years old and a freshman at Gallaudet. Because the primary suspect in the Plunkett case, Minch, had been barred from campus, and because security had been tightened since the previous murder, Varner's death was even more surprising and upsetting. Campus members were unsettled by the fact that the killer was most likely among them and mostly likely a member of the community.

The MPD and the investigating detectives got a lucky break when Joseph Mesa was recorded on video cashing a check drawn from Benjamin Varner's account. The police immediately focused on Mesa as their primary suspect. During the interrogation, Mesa voluntarily confessed to having murdered not only Varner but also Plunkett. Despite the fact that Mesa had a history of violence and that he had used Plunkett's credit card to buy clothing online and divert it to his own address, investigators had missed him as a suspect. In both murders, Mesa's motive appeared to have been greed. With Mesa's confession and charge, Minch was officially exonerated.

Two students dead, one student falsely arrested, and a community in shambles, all because the police department did not have the capacity or cultural competency to work with the communities directly affected by these crimes.

## **Why This Case Matters**

Though it is impossible to know for sure whether this case could have been handled more efficiently and effectively had the lesbian officers been involved from the beginning, clearly their personal experiences and professional skills improved their understanding of the situation and gave them unique insights into certain elements of the case. The officers knew whom to speak with about the incident, understood the social and cultural norms of the community, and had credibility among those interviewed. Had these officers been consulted or included at the beginning of the case, it is possible that the MPD would have better understood the exchanges that occurred during Minch's six-hour interrogation. For example, they might have been better informed and prepared for the reaction they received when detectives accused him of being gay. It is

also possible that the MPD would not have wasted almost five months trying to build a case against the wrong suspect. Earlier involvement by the lesbian officers would also have been valuable in maintaining positive community relations as the investigation progressed. At a minimum, lesbian and gay students and community members would have felt safer and more at home in the larger community if the MPD had deployed these officers to investigate previously reported hate incidents.

This case highlights the importance of diversity among officers for community policing. It also highlights the importance of having officers who are culturally competent. The primary investigators missed important elements of the case due to incompetence, homophobia, and ignorance. In this context, good policing requires officers who are committed to serving and knowledgeable about their communities. Good policing—policing that is effective, efficient, and, from a community perspective, equitable—requires officers to bring their unique perspectives, histories, experiences, and identities to the job.

Though the Plunkett and Varner murders resulted in the MPD redoubling its efforts to increase diversity on the force, including diversity in regard to sexual orientation, and to hire and train culturally competent lesbian and gay community liaison officers, such efforts have not been the norm for the majority of police agencies and officers around the world. Among the police agencies that have embraced lesbian and gay officers among their ranks in the pursuit of work force diversity are those in Western European countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany. Several other nations around the world have also been leaders in this area, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Iceland. The efforts of the United States have been more nuanced and less uniform. The local nature of policing in the United States means that communities vary greatly depending on location, size, socioeconomic status, history, and leadership. These variations have resulted in the welcoming of gay and lesbian liaison officers in unexpected places, such as Fargo, North Dakota, and San Antonio, Texas. They have also produced resistance in unexpected places, such as Atlanta, Georgia, and Boston, Massachusetts.

This book examines and discusses the work lives of lesbian and gay police officers, and attempts to assess their impact on policing today. Past research on this group has been limited to narrative discussions of small pools of officers operating in hostile work environments. For example, in 1993, two seminal books were published about lesbian and gay police officers: Stephen Leinen's *Gay Cops* and Marc Burke's *Coming Out of the Blue*. Leinen provided valuable insights into the

work and personal lives of forty-one lesbian and gay police officers in New York City, highlighting the discrimination and harassment that officers expected, perceived, and experienced. Burke's book, focusing on officers in the United Kingdom, chronicled the daily lives of lesbian and gay officers and how they managed their sexual identities in what was often a hostile work environment.

While this research was instrumental in helping to improve the law enforcement environment for lesbian and gay people in policing, it no longer represents the situation in which many lesbian and gay police officers serve. Today, many lesbian and gay officers serve in communities that have nondiscrimination laws, equal benefits ordinances, and, in some cases, legal same-sex marriage. In the United States, 27 states and over 200 local jurisdictions expressly prohibit public employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Human Rights Campaign, 2010). In the United Kingdom, police agencies are now among the most gay-friendly employers in the country (Stonewall, 2010). Openly lesbian and gay officers now serve at all levels of law enforcement, including the highest levels of management and leadership. They often work as liaisons to the broader lesbian and gay community, and aid in training and sensitizing law enforcement about the unique needs of this community. Also, many officers find support from other officers through gay law enforcement associations. These associations have become the primary advocates of change for lesbian and gay people in police service. In short, the experiences and work lives of lesbian and gay officers—and others in law enforcement—are richer, fuller, and more complex than previous research suggests. Furthermore, their open participation in policing, corrections, and courts has had a direct impact on criminal justice and law enforcement in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

In this book I explore both the barriers that openly lesbian and gay officers face and the opportunities they encounter. I also explore how police agencies have evolved to become more professional regarding—if not outwardly friendly toward—the idea of police agency diversity as well as more responsive to the needs of the many communities they serve, including the lesbian and gay community.

To tell this more complex story about the lives of lesbian and gay officers, I use both qualitative and quantitative data. Like previous scholars in this area, I conducted interviews with openly lesbian and gay officers—in my case, with members of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., and with members of the Wiltshire and Hampshire constabularies in the United Kingdom. These qualitative

interviews are the basis for this book's in-depth stories describing the lives of lesbian and gay officers. The information gathered from these valuable conversations is intermingled throughout the narrative with material drawn from archival documents and other sources relating to the communities in which the officers serve. I also attempt to connect the issues raised in my conversations with lesbian and gay officers to contemporary issues in policing, lesbian and gay studies, and human resource management and theory.

For quantitative data, this book relies on original survey data from lesbian and gay officers. I conducted these surveys in the summer of 2007 at the International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Criminal Justice Professionals, held in Providence, Rhode Island, and in the fall of 2009 in the United Kingdom through online distribution. The data resulting from these surveys were valuable in understanding the aggregate experiences of the officers. Additionally, these data were used to articulate perceptions of their personal and work lives that many lesbian and gay officers share and that are therefore more generalizable than qualitative stories. By integrating the unique narratives with aggregated, quantitative data, this book provides a comprehensive, contemporary view of the lives and shared experiences of lesbian and gay police officers.

I believe that the experiences of these officers together represent a unique and important contribution to our understanding of policing and to our ideas about experiences in the workplace. While law enforcement careers were, for the most part, opened to racial minorities and women via legal mandates, this has not been the case for openly lesbian and gay people in law enforcement. And, while the racial and gender integration of policing has influenced and informed the lesbian and gay experience, the experiences of lesbian and gay people in policing are different. For example, while policies exist in both the United States and the United Kingdom to prevent employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, neither country has adopted explicit positive or affirmative action plans to increase the proportion of lesbian and gay people in law enforcement. To date, efforts to target and recruit lesbian and gay people into policing have been local and voluntary in nature.

### **Similarities Between the US and UK Experiences**

Policing history, customs, and practices in the United States and the United Kingdom are not identical, but the similarities are much more plentiful than the differences, and each country has much to teach us



about policing in modern Western societies. One similarity is that both countries have moved toward the community model as a strategy for better policing. Diffusion of innovation between the two countries about policing has no doubt contributed to their similar evolution. The efforts of lesbian and gay officers to achieve equality represents another similarity, in that professional associations for lesbian and gay officers emerged in both the United States and the United Kingdom at nearly the same time, with similar missions, goals, and agendas.

With the exception of the quantitative chapters and the case studies on the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police and the Wiltshire Constabulary, I consider the experiences of lesbian and gay officers in both countries together. Where similarities are apparent, I attempt to make comparisons, and where differences are apparent, I try to draw distinctions. The qualitative and quantitative data, as well as the literature, suggest this is an appropriate approach (Boin, 2001). Except where there are specific differences of policing practice, I have approached the experiences of US and British lesbian and gay police officers as being very similar. The shared occupational similarities are more prominent than the geographic differences.

## **Overview of the Book**

Each of the chapters that follow focuses on a specific aspect of policing in relation to lesbian and gay people. Chapter 2 introduces readers to multiple strands of the relevant literature, including background information on discrimination in public employment against lesbian and gay people, the ways in which sexual minorities manage disclosure in the workplace, the recent history of lesbian and gay people in policing, and the development of shared perceptions about the work environment. Chapter 2 also shows how organizational effectiveness can be compromised when police agencies resist diversification, but improved when agencies embrace planned change.

Chapter 3 discusses the emergence and evolution of community policing. Community policing is a philosophy that promotes police and community strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address community and law enforcement issues, concerns, or problems. Community policing has been one of several factors that helps to explain why many police agencies have actively attempted to diversify their ranks. The joint community and law enforcement nature of community policing has encouraged

agencies to collaborate with a number of communities, including the lesbian and gay community, to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of law enforcement.

Chapter 4 explores the experiences and shared perceptions of lesbian and gay officers in the United States and the United Kingdom. This chapter presents quantitative information about the officers, including demographic information, experiences in policing, special work opportunities and barriers for openly lesbian and gay officers, and changes in work climate over time. The chapter also offers analysis of the variations between the agencies in the two countries.

Chapter 5 discusses the various ways in which lesbian and gay people have uniquely served in law enforcement. Sometimes, openly lesbian or gay officers serve as informal sources of information for an agency and its staff. In other cases, their work includes diversity training and other human resource–related functions, such as recruitment. In their most highly integrated role, lesbian and gay officers are engaged in investigative work that includes service to all communities, including the lesbian and gay community.

Chapter 6 consists of two case studies: one in the United States and one in the United Kingdom. The US case study highlights the experiences of the Gay and Lesbian Liaison Unit in Washington, D.C. It explains the emergence and evolution of the unit and its work in the Metropolitan Police Department. The UK case study explores the history and functions of lesbian and gay liaison officers (GLOs, also known as LAGLOs) in the Wiltshire Constabulary. It highlights the successes and challenges faced by liaison officers in the United Kingdom. This perspective is unusual in that it focuses on issues relating to lesbian and gay officers living and working in a rural community, including the services they offer to a largely invisible lesbian and gay community.

Chapter 7 explores the role of professional police associations in helping to diversify police agencies. As lesbian and gay officers began to form networks, professional associations emerged to support these officers. These associations, modeled after other minority associations, helped to organize and mobilize lesbian and gay officers as a visible minority within policing. These associations have been among the most important catalysts in diversifying police agencies, by acting as both supportive and antagonistic actors within them.

Chapter 8 identifies organizational, human resource, and administrative efforts to improve recruitment and retention of lesbian and gay police officers. This chapter also articulates some scholarly based best practices and recommendations that can guide other police agencies and

other public service organizations as they embrace more diverse work forces.

Chapter 9 offers some empirical best practices based on the data and information drawn from the interviews, focus groups, and surveys conducted in writing this book. These best practices act as a roadmap for the future of law enforcement and for the profession's efforts to create more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Finally, I have dispersed throughout the book several profiles of lesbian and gay police officers. These profiles are an opportunity for officers to speak, in their own voices, about important issues such as the experience of being a liaison officer, the experience of being openly lesbian or gay, both on the force and in the community, and the experience of handling issues of specific interest to lesbian and gay people, including hate crimes.

\* \* \*

A few notes about the terms: First, I generally use the term *police agency*, even though this is uncommon in both the United States and the United Kingdom, where *police department*, *police organization*, *police service*, and *constabulary* are more frequently used. Although any of these terms might serve, *police agency* strikes me as the most inclusive; it simply denotes the local law enforcement organization responsible for protecting life and property in a community. This is usually accomplished through patrol, requests for assistance, and collaborative prevention efforts. Second, in most cases I refer to *lesbian and gay* officers rather than *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender* (LGBT) officers. Since my qualitative data capture information about lesbian and gay officers only, and my quantitative data secure only minimal information about bisexual and transgender officers, my findings are not generalizable to the latter. Based on my previous work on transgender issues in the workplace (Colvin, 2007, 2008), I believe that the experiences of transgender police officers and community members are substantially different from those of lesbian and gay people. While beyond the scope of this book, transgender policing is certainly a worthy topic for further exploration.

Though this book offers a mostly positive perspective on the work of lesbian and gay officers, this is not to suggest that the struggle to make police agencies more responsive and diverse has been easy, nor does it suggest that the process is complete. As the survey data from both the United States and the United Kingdom indicate, lesbian and

gay officers still face harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Some openly lesbian and gay officers are routinely subject to verbal abuse, and some conceal their sexuality to avoid persecution in their agencies. However, praiseworthy gains have indeed been made. In 1993, when Leinen's *Gay Cops* and Burke's *Coming Out of the Blue* were published, few would have imagined that lesbian and gay officers would soon serve openly in rural communities like those of Wiltshire or North Dakota, attain the rank of chief of police, and even run for elected office. Few would have imagined liaisons and units designed to protect, serve, and collaborate with local lesbian and gay communities. While much improvement is still needed in the majority of police agencies, I hope this book will serve as a blueprint and an inspiration for police agencies and other public service workplaces to become more efficient, effective, and equitable through inclusion and diversity.

## Note

1. In 1980, a nineteen-year-old student was stabbed and pushed out of an eighth-story window at Benson Hall. In 1990, a forty-one-year-old former student collapsed after a dispute with an instructor and a struggle with campus security (Fernandez and Leonnig, 2000).