

Let's meet Prof Holona Ochs

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Ochs, Holona, Police July 20, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about Holona Ochs* 

Holona Ochs has been mentioned prominently in our recent discussions about the police department as part of the national conversation on systemic racism precipitated by the murder of George Floyd.

Councilwoman Negrón distributed information about her research prior to the July 7 Council meeting that took up the Reynolds/Crampsie Smith resolution on the Community Engagement Initiative, Anna Smith and Al Wurth mentioned her favorably in public comments relative to the resolution, and Councilman Reynolds reported at the July 7 Council meeting that, in fact, he spent an hour and a half in discussion with her.

The Reynolds/Crampsie Smith resolution was amended to recommend consideration of her research: “The Administration should work with and incorporate recommendations by research experts including Lehigh University’s Core Grant team who recently conducted a large research project on policing in the Lehigh Valley.”

Looks like we’re going to hear more from Prof Ochs.



Time to meet her.

Prof Holona Ochs is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Lehigh University and heads the department's graduate program.

Prof Ochs describes her research on democratic policing in the United States:

I am also working on a constellation of projects on democratic policing in the US. The first study is a time series analysis of the police use of lethal force. This project explores the impact of mental healthcare investments across states on deadly encounters with the police and the potential for Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) to make policing safer for the police and the public. The second study examines the aggregate patterns of bias in the execution of lethal force across various demographic groups and geographical regions. This project includes case studies to further identify factors that may reduce the potential for bias the police use of force. The third research project on policing is an interdisciplinary study of the perspectives on policing that the police and various communities have in order to identify potential disjunctures. We expect that differences in the understandings of the challenges and complexities of policing and in expectations of the police may serve as opportunities to improve police-public relations.

The specific work that brings Prof Ochs to the forefront of our attention at this time is a study of *local* policing: “Democratic Policing: Bias Reduction and Police-Public Interactions.” This study was just coming to a conclusion when the pandemic suspended activity at Lehigh in March, and now we look forward to a final report on the 124 interviews conducted, with a bit o’luck, in the fall.

from Sara K. Satullo, “How Lehigh Valley cops could help change U.S. policing for the better.” lehighvalleylive.com., January 2, 2019.

A team of Lehigh University researchers are digging into public perceptions of law enforcement in the Lehigh Valley and looking into ways to reduce biases on all sides.

The research is still in its early stages with the team gathering data through surveys and focus groups with a wide swath of Lehigh Valley residents, including police officers, community groups, Lehigh students and folks who have served time in jail.

The idea for the project — Democratic Policing: Bias Reduction and Police-Public Interactions — sprung out of informal conversations about bias amongst Lehigh faculty in the psychology, criminal justice and political science departments.

“The real motivation here is to learn about those institutional factors that we can affect that will make policing safer for the police and the public,” explained Holona Ochs, Lehigh associate professor and graduate director in the political science department, who has been studying policing since 2009.

While the use of force by police in the Lehigh Valley is pretty rare, researchers think the region’s unique geography and demographics may result in real life applications across the country.

The team wants to know how participants view their community’s relationship with police and what they think an officer’s job actually is. And they want to hear from officers about the challenges of modern policing.

“We’re trying to understand where are people’s perspectives aligned and where are they misaligned,” said Dominic Packer, associate professor of psychology and associate dean of research and graduate programs in Lehigh’s College of Arts and Sciences. “They are really exploratory focus groups.”

Adjunct Lehigh professor and recently retired Bethlehem police Sgt. Wade Haubert thinks inherent bias is a fascinating research topic with real world applications.

“Start off acknowledging what we all know: every single person in this country has grown up in some environment where they ultimately have bias,” Haubert said. “It doesn’t mean that it is bad, that you are a bigot. Let’s just all acknowledge, we have some stereotypes. Let’s identify through a study why those things might occur and we can look at what we can do to potentially recognize that and factor that in as a conscious factor in how we make decisions.”

Informal conversations about police tactics and procedures in the wake of high-profile police shootings started forming the questions that are now the basis of the research, Haubert said. His own concerns about the direction of policing attracted him to the project.

“I was very frustrated with the way the profession of policing has changed over the last 20 years,” Haubert said. “...When I first got hired, community policing was a big thing and the Bethlehem Police Department was one of the poster children for good community policing.”

This was lost nationally in the wake of 9/11.

“We lost our ability to put the citizens first and have the ability to communicate with them and understand that most people support us,” Haubert said.

“Different communities have different expectations of the police and relate to the police in different ways and it affects the complexity of policing and whether people think the police are doing a good job,” Ochs said.

But as the region changes demographically those differences could potentially be problematic if a “past practice of acceptable policing behavior is applied to a diverse community,” Haubert said.

If a brown skinned family moves into a largely white and homogeneous borough, the police might be called as they are moving in, Haubert said. Or if you’re driving a certain type of car while gawking at mansions in Upper Saucon Township you may get stopped.

Researchers hope these focus groups can spur wider conversations among communities with the police, so residents can gain a better understanding of ins and outs of policing and how to communicate with police.

“The bigger goal is to bring different communities together with the police and talk about the challenges and complexities of policing and how different communities can better relate and interact using the police as intermediaries,” Ochs said.

“If we can build this research further we’d like to create Center of the Study of Democratic Policing — that center would be an online forum and a public space where we would organize conversations about maintaining peaceful relations without the use of force,” Ochs said.

If police departments are interested in specialized training or resources, the center could offer that as well, she said.

We’ll devote two or three more posts to getting to know Prof Ochs’ work.