



When tensions rise, police officers who learn and live their ethics will continue to set the pace for better relationships with media and community **By Tim Pardue**

The tension between police and the citizens they protect is increasing, as a result of recent events like the shooting of Michael Brown, a young African American who was shot by a white officer, and the death of Eric Garner, an African American who was killed while a white police officer was attempting to arrest him. Situations like these have caused many to question the ethical integrity of police officers.

The value of ethics

In fact, ethics play a valuable role in law enforcement and the police profession. As cities, counties and states entrust police officers with their safety, citizens have to be able to trust the police. If they don't, police officers cannot do their jobs. Police officers and law enforcement officers encounter individuals in a time of need and are involved in their lives when they are most vulnerable.

The questioning of ethics may

arise when citizens develop negative opinions toward police solely based on recent situations that have gained national media attention, having no direct interaction with police officers themselves. The public relies on information they receive from the media, which is not always accurate or complete. In the Michael Brown case for example, citizens questioned the ethics of officers involved and took to rioting, causing significant damage to the community and its businesses.

Asking the tough questions

Are police unethical? The answer to this question is not a simple one. Yes, there can be unethical police, just as there can be unethical nurses, doctors, firefighters, politicians, clergy, etc., but of the more than 900,000 law enforcement officers in the U.S., there are vastly *more* ethical police officers than there are unethical ones.

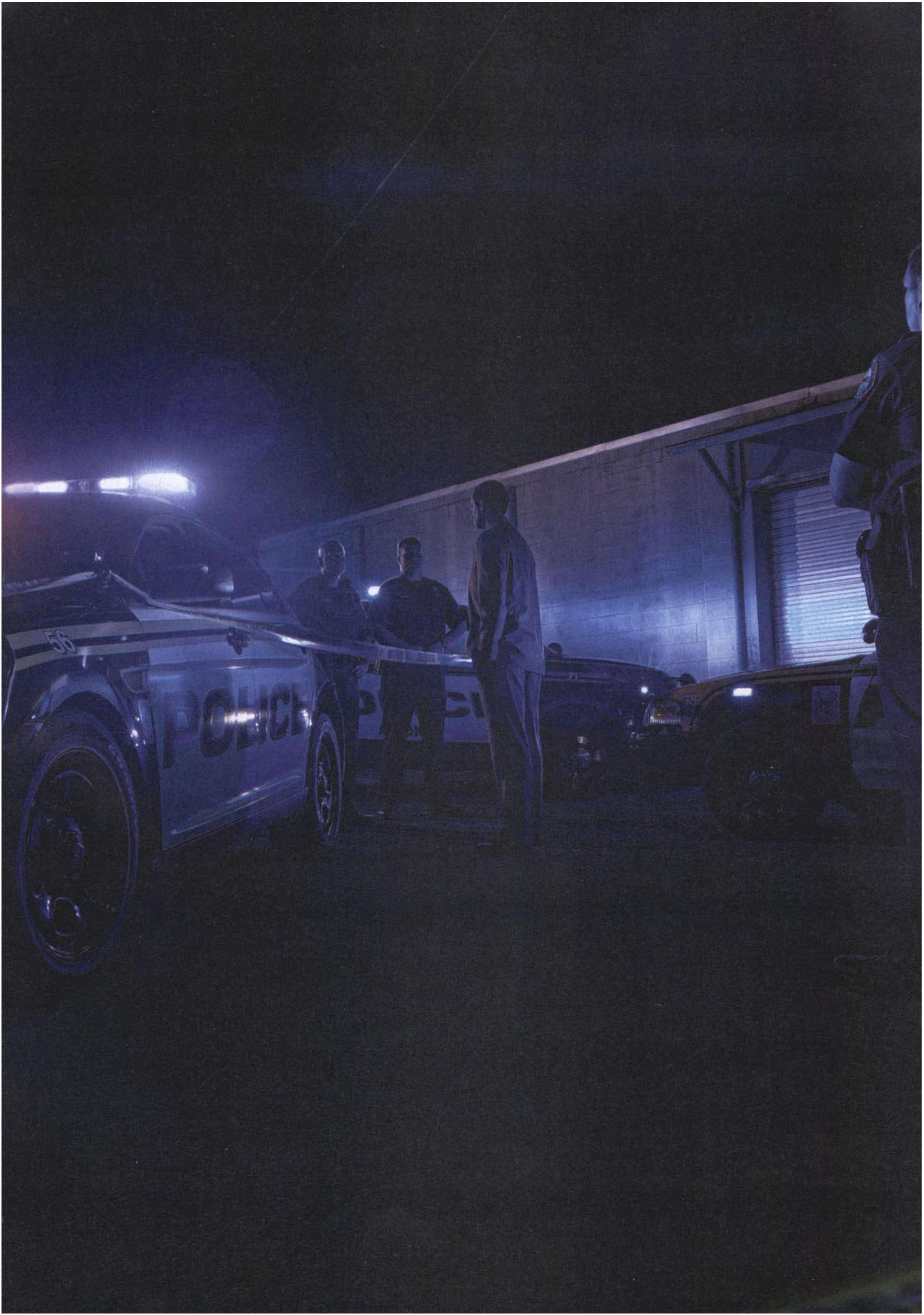
In fact, a 2014 poll showed that citizens view police as more ethical than

clergy (Honesty/Ethics in Professions, 2014). This however does not always seem to come across in the media. Members of congress ranked on the bottom of the ethical survey in 2012, just above salespeople, yet there haven't been any recent riots due to unethical congress actions that can influence the lives of millions. So why do police have targets on their back?

The power of the media

Media outlets are very influential in public opinion. They provide information, or at least partial information, about situations to millions of individuals across the world, who in turn often form opinions and generalizations based on what they receive. In 2014, there was a limited number of police ethical issues that gained national media attention, yet based off of this coverage, some individuals incorrectly label the entire profession as unethical or corrupt.

In the Michael Brown and Eric Garner examples, the media reported on a few police officers that may or may not have made some bad decisions. Many elements seem to have been left out, or at least minimized, in the coverage of these situations. The media only reported bits and pieces



to capture their audience's attention. According to the courts; however, neither officers involved in these cases broke the law, according to the grand jury's failure to indict either officer. With that as the basis of ethics, anyone who says they were unethical is

technically wrong—however many believe the system failed.

Had the media reported the entire story in both these cases, there may have been less tension and more working together to solve issues, such as rebuilding the community. Instead, the

coverage contributed to the tension and may have actually escalated the public's response.

Looking ahead

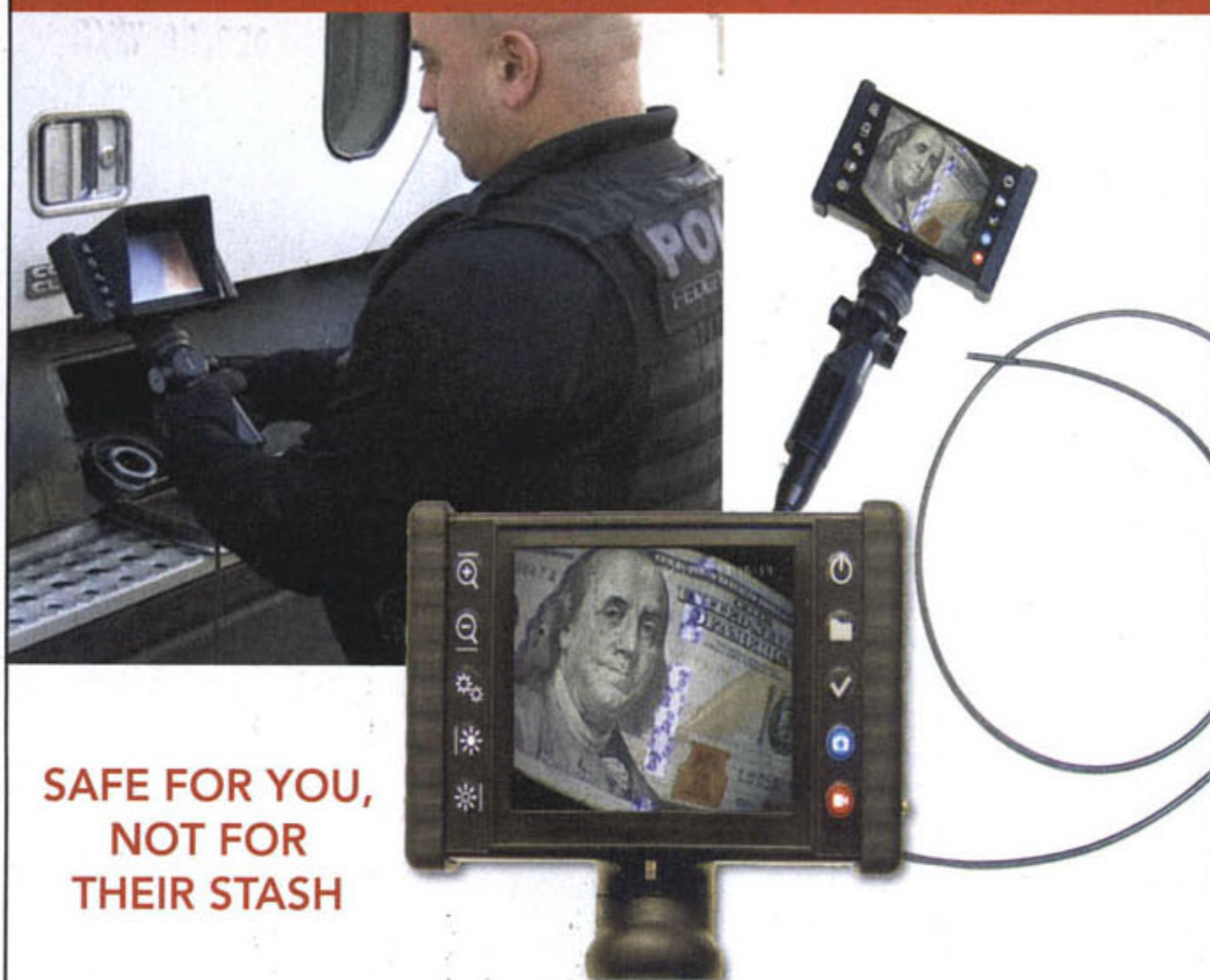
Ethics in 21st Century law enforcement are absolutely, positively necessary. If police do not have ethical values, or even if they have ethical values but the communities have tainted opinions about those ethics, public safety is at risk. Fortunately, ethics are taught throughout a police officer's training and career, such as the police academy and during recurrent annual training. Additionally, officers that seek a higher education degree typically take courses on ethics.

Moving forward, greater communication will result in greater understanding. Police departments and the media must continue to foster a better working relationship—departments should be open to the media coming in and seeing firsthand how they operate, while the media needs to keep in mind that investigations often take time, and decisions can't be made immediately, therefore not all of the facts will be available right away. When certain issues can't be discussed, the media should continue to be respectful of that. Ideally, a greater open-door policy would help bridge the communication gaps that often exist between departments and the media. Both police and media must continue to be held to high ethical standards, as they both have enormous impacts on the community. ■



Tim Pardue is an 18-year law enforcement officer with experience at the state and local levels. He has worked in various roles including investigations, internal affairs and patrol. He is currently an associate dean in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Kaplan University, and oversees the public safety program.

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