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Regional

Roles of police, military change with society

The sweeping immigration reform bill currently before Congress may be in danger of not passing due to some members' insistence that strict border enforcement rules be included in any changes to the law. In these tough economic times – particularly in state budgets – this demand begs the question of just how increased surveillance and border patrols will be paid for and just who will foot the bill, states or the federal government.

"By law in the United States the military can't play a law enforcement role. That goes back to our roots of separating out the military as a law enforcement entity," explained Matthew Petrocelli, an associate professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Yet he said that he thinks that that can change somewhat with any new legislation.

"I certainly think at this point in history that the military could possibly have a role, particularly in the immigration bill coming to the floor now. If we truly wanted to secure the borders, the military could definitely play a role in that capacity because we simply could not hire enough border patrol agents or police officers to do that job." But does he envision soldiers patrolling American streets as part of law enforcement?

"I don't think that's a good idea because soldiers and police officers have very different missions in American society," he said. "Soldiers are trained to attack, destroy and kill when they have to, while the police mission is to protect and serve people." That does not mean, he added, that police have not become more militarized in recent years.

"The police face situations that are military in nature," he said. "The idea of SWAT



Photo courtesy of Trish Oberweis

Dr. Matthew Petrocelli at his office.

teams was originally predicated on the notion of hostage rescues, and that's something that the military has a specialty in

historically. Being a former soldier, I can tell you that there is a lot of crossover between military training and police training."

Born in Silver Spring, Md., Petrocelli grew up in New Jersey. He received his bachelor's degree from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, his master's in criminal justice from the University of Colorado at Denver and his doctorate in social justice from Arizona State University.

Another of Petrocelli's research interests involves the intersection of law enforcement and drug abuse, and his views may surprise many.

"Drug use and drug addiction is a medical issue," he said. "By any empirical measure our efforts to stem drug use in the United States have largely failed. I don't think anyone should use drugs, but I also think that people who do should not be criminally prosecuted because, first of all, it's not logistically viable anymore. We can't support this as a criminal justice apparatus." Petrocelli sees a broken system.

"If we are going to keep prosecuting this 'war on drugs,' then the criminal justice apparatus has to grow and that means more money has to be spent," he said. "We have to hire more cops and build more prisons, and we simply do not have the apparatus to do that anymore. So, just from a logistic point of view, and taking morality out of the equation, we just can't realistically continue to pursue the way we have pursued this. Anyone who studies the issue knows that and I think the U.S. is moving toward that now." Another of his areas of research is racial profiling.

"In its infancy, it was thought of not so much as racial profiling but as simple criminal profiling," he said. "For instance, in my home state of New Jersey, patrols looked at the data that said that those running drugs up from Florida were younger African-American males. They tend to drive this kind of car and so they started

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as a matter of policy to pull those individuals over. Of course, that's racial profiling." Such policies, he added, can give the impression that police actions are racially motivated.

"I don't think that there is any kind of racial infestation in policing or anything like that," he said. "Rather, these were individuals who were trying to stop bad guys. Certainly when it came to light that this profiling practice was illegal, police got a lot smarter about that. So there has been this enlightenment about racial profiling and police are very careful about what they do." One positive outcome of this situation, Petrocelli said, has been that police forces these days are much more diverse than in the past.

"In the United States, we have historically had a problem achieving diversity goals in policing," he said. "There are different reasons for that and one of the reasons is how minorities perceive the police institution. They perceived it, whether it's true or not, as an oppressive institution. In comparison, if a white person wants to be a police officer, that's a symbol of status and that's great. In the African-American community, if you want to be a police officer it's just the opposite, you are joining them, the oppressors."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.