POLICE & TEENAGERS:
WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT EACH OTHER

By Captain Nick Francis, Apple Valley (MN) Police Department and Grace Ricarda, student, Benson (MN) High School
In the digital era, getting together and talking about differences does not happen face-to-face as some older generations would like it to. Teenagers are generationally different from most police officers as they prefer to communicate digitally or sometimes “virtually”. In the police world, a vast majority of contact with residents happens face-to-face. The bottom line is that there’s no perfect way for police officers and teenagers to learn about each other.

So in that spirit, the authors have collaborated to provide each group with some general characteristics about their respective cultural subgroups.

**WHAT TEENAGERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE POLICE**

- **Police officers love the communities we serve.**
  By the nature of the work we do in our community, we become deeply invested in the safety, health and wellbeing of that community. Whether or not we live in that city, we get to know the residents, the parks, the elected officials, the students, and the fabric of that community in a way no other professional will. We support our local schools and want the best for our community, especially our teenagers.

- **Police officers may seem hard on you as a young driver.**
  You might get a citation from a police officer and think “I really wish they would have given me a warning”. As much as we might want to let you off easy, we know that teenagers are most at risk for dying in a traffic crash. Young drivers are over-represented in traffic crashes and traffic fatalities are the leading cause of death for teens. Warnings seldom work long term so a traffic ticket early in your driving career might make you a better driver long term and ultimately save your life.

- **Police officers aren’t bullies.**
  By nature of the authority we have and the difficult job that we do, we may come across as bullies when you see us. But take away the uniform and all the equipment and we are outgoing, fun loving men and women not unlike your parents, aunts and uncles, or older siblings. Here’s a challenge, ask a cop for a high five next time you see one, my bet is you will see a smile on their face and their hand in the air. Use the opportunity to strike up a conversation with us.

- **Police officers put their lives on the line for you every day.**
  There are plenty of jobs in the world that are more dangerous than police work. Truck drivers, farmers and construction workers have higher fatality rates when compared to police officers. But, at an increasing rate, heavily armed citizens are adding to the sad list of mass shootings or assaults. Nobody knows when or where these will happen but police officers across the nation are prepared and ready to run towards the gunfire while their community rightfully so runs away. Our top priority is to keep you safe in school and we take that very seriously.
Officer mistakes.

Just like any human being, we routinely make mistakes in police work. Sometimes we're not as great at admitting it though. The work we do is often videotaped and filmed by us as well as suspects, witnesses and bystanders. Please do not think that the partial video or narrative they provide with it is fact. More often than not, there is much more to the story. Understand that we do make mistakes, but please give us the benefit of the doubt and ask for our side of the story when it's something you see in person. We are happy to share it with you.

What Police Officers Should Know About Teenagers

Teenagers make mistakes, too.

Just like everyone else, we make mistakes and we know we do. Although it doesn't always seem like it, we want to learn from our mistakes. When we are told exactly what our mistakes may lead to if we continue, it's a lot more effective than just being scorned for them. A stern voice and a good message can make a huge impact.

Teenagers aren't against you.

We know police officers are doing their job, and we know that job is incredibly important. We are on your side. We want to live in the same type of communities you want to live in. Just as you strive to do your part in keeping our communities safe, clean and inviting, we are doing the same. If we both adjust our perspectives a little, we can form some great teams and get a lot accomplished.

Teenagers often do before we think.

As teens, we sometimes let emotion or other factors drive our decisions instead of logic. "But officer, we were just trying to have fun" may be one you hear a lot of. It's true though, that often times our intent was fun, but most likely we didn't think about the outcomes that a "fun" time could have. Again, we need to be reminded that it's not just us in the world, and that our decisions affect a lot more people than just us.

It's not always what it looks like.

Give us teenagers the benefit of the doubt. Maybe we were actually just driving around, listening to music in our cars, and not doing anything illegal. Yes, if our music is too loud, pull us over. If we aren't wearing seatbelts, give us a ticket. Because your job is keeping the community safe, if we look suspicious in any way, just pull us over and ask what's up! We don't mind at all. As long as the "what's up?" doesn't turn into a full-fledged interrogation. Remember, don't assume. We often react very strongly when assumptions are made before we get the chance to explain. Similar to how you feel when citizens form opinions about you, your department, or police officers in general without fact.

It's not that teenagers don't like the police; it's that we don't like authority.

We have a desire to please authority as well as a frustration with authority. Those things clash. We want to look good in the eyes of parents, teachers, and yes also police officers. With that being said, we also don't always like the things parents, teachers, and police officers have to say, no matter how right they are. We get frustrated when we are talked down to, or treated like kids. We also aren't quite ready to be treated like adults. It's all about finding that balance.

We live in an ever changing and evolving world right now. It may seem as if our nation is becoming more polarized by generation, profession, political affiliation or ethnicity. In the end, we will all get along and serve our communities better if we accept, understand and appreciate each other.

As the old saying goes "kids will be kids". The same can be said toward the police "cops will be cops". This means that each of us have cultural norms within our group that others might not fully understand or appreciate. With some solid communication and an open mind, law enforcement officers and teenagers can come together even more and overcome the forces that are trying to pull us apart.

About the Authors:

Nick Francis is a police captain for the Apple Valley Department in Minnesota and an adjunct instructor for Concordia University in Saint Paul, MN. He has 17 years of service in the police department working assignments from patrol to administration.

Grace Ricard is a high school senior at Benson High School in Minnesota. She is heavily involved in her school and her community. She plans to continue her education at Minnesota State University Mankato, majoring in Elementary Education and minoring in theatre.